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Vol. XVII. Published Every Week. Beadle & Adams, Publishers, 98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., January 3, 1883. Ten Cents a Copy. \$5.00 a Year. No. 219

THE SCORPION BROTHERS; or, Mad Tom's Mission.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,

AUTHOR OF "CACTUS JACK," "DON SOMBRERO," "LADY JAGUAR," ETC., ETC.



"BY HEAVEN!" SAID GILBERT, "IT IS AS I THOUGHT—'TIS THE SIGN OF THE SCORPION BROTHERS."

The Scorpion Brothers ; OR, MAD TOM'S MISSION.

BY CAPT. MARK WILTON,
AUTHOR OF "CACTUS JACK," "DON SOMBRERO,"
"LADY JAGUAR," "BLIZZARD BEN,"
"YOUNG KENTUCK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE ASSASSIN'S KNIFE.

"WHICH shall it be—peace or war?"

"War to the knife."

"Then pick your man and blaze away!"

And the brief conversation was followed by some very accurate and spirited revolver work, an argument before which men fell freely, and then the battle was won against odds.

The Brick Bottom stage had been stopped in the Porcupine Pass by road-agents, and the driver had settled back on his seat to wait until they had worked their pleasure, but bullets had been passed over instead of purses; and the coach rolled on its way with the driver wondering if he had chain lightning inside.

One of the two passengers laughed lightly.

"Didn't I tell you those fellows were made of common clay?" he asked. "It only takes a little pluck to beat 'em!"

"We dealt the cards in a way new to them. I reckon they have lorded it over Porcupine Pass until they have become careless, and our way of doing business took them by surprise. I pity the next human critter that falls into their hands."

"Maybe they will walk over to Brick Bottom and try their luck against us again."

"Let them come; I reckon we can protect ourselves."

They *did* look capable of doing all that, for two better specimens of mankind had never honored the stage with their presence; and that their looks went more than surface-deep had been shown by the way their revolvers were used.

Both were young men—twenty-five years would probably cover the ground; but their powerful forms and strong, steady faces were of the kind that make their mark in times of war.

The one who had first spoken—his name was Roland Gilbert—was dark-complexioned, with straight, black hair, a handsome mustache, and a face which would at once attract man or woman. Some one has said that handsome men are always either villains or fools, but Roland Gilbert did not seem to be either.

His companion was heavier built than he and looked a trifle older. He, too, was of the brunette type, but his complexion was lighter than Gilbert's.

At first sight one was impressed by the look of firmness and resolution on his face. The jaws were strong, the heavy mustache did not wholly conceal the firm mouth, the eyes were gray, large, strong and steady. It was the face of a man who, while he would not be prone to seek danger, would, if driven to it, face what came with the firmness of a rock.

So much Gilbert could easily see, and he decided, too, that, while he was not sure whether the man was honest or not, he would be one to cling to a partner, once chosen, to the bitter end.

"My name is Giles Percival," said the strong-faced man, as they rolled on toward Brick Bottom. "I'm a Texan by birth and associations, but I've been traveling a good deal during the last five years. Very soon I'm going back to the Rio Grande and let father kill a fatted steer for the prodigal."

He laughed lightly as he ran his fingers through his abundant hair, but Roland Gilbert's face grew grave.

"I can't say as much. I haven't a human being to welcome me anywhere because of ties of blood. It's a little gloomy, at times, this being uncared-for and unsung, but I can weather the gale."

He finished with a careless laugh, and the stage rolled on toward Brick Bottom.

With that place, our story has little to do, so we need give no minute description. It was a mining town of Arizona, a prosperous place, not so wicked as many of its class, and possessing some attractions for a stranger.

When the stage rolled in and the driver had told how his two passengers had beaten off the road-agents, Percival and Gilbert became heroes in the eyes of men who admired courage and bold deeds. With such men, the Brick Bottom citizen was always ready to drink or play poker.

Had it not been for the day's adventure, it is likely our two characters would have remained almost as little acquainted as they were when they first met that morning, but the little revolver episode had drawn them together and they remained glued, as we may say.

They remained three days at and about Brick Bottom. They visited the mines and places of interest together, and they roved among the hills, with their rifles, nearly every day. Nei-

ther seemed to lack for money, and the pleasures of the town were well tested.

One evening they were seated together in the hotel which they honored with their presence.

"I suppose we part to-morrow," said Percival.

"Yes, unless you decide to push up the Gila with me."

"I would like to, but father and Nida—my sister, you know—are anxious to see me at the ranch and I must obey the call. Five years away from home! It's quite a while, and their runaway boy has gained forty pounds of flesh and grown a mustache in that time. I left them on a plantation in Louisiana, and now they are on the Texas ranch. Gilbert, I want you to visit me there when you are tired of the Gila."

Gilbert looked thoughtful. He had not expected the invitation, but the idea had a fascination for him and he only hesitated because he did not wish to rush to Percival's arms at once.

"I am afraid I should be more troublesome than useful," he remonstrated.

"Nonsense! I want you, and that is enough. My honored parent has plenty of cash and he will make my friends his own; I'm sure of it. Don't refuse, my good fellow, or we shall quarrel."

Gilbert did not refuse. The conversation ended in a promise that he would, a month later, turn his face toward the Rio Grande, and amid the smoke of their pipes they talked of the past and future.

On the following morning they separated. Percival mounted a tough mustang he had bought in the village and started east, while Roland Gilbert took the stage for Snicker's Camp.

He was the only passenger, for there did not seem to be a rush of trade; but the fact did not worry him, and he rested as easily as possible inside the stage and rolled on toward Snicker's.

He had been for some time working in the interests of Eastern capitalists who wanted information in regard to the mines of Arizona, and as Gilbert was a practical miner, he had sent them a good deal of valuable reading.

During this journey, however, he decided to abandon the business at the end of a month and seek a little rest and quiet on the Texas ranch. After that, he believed he would go into active mining work. Not that he aspired to swing a pick, or was rich enough to own a mine, but many people would be glad to secure his services as foreman, and back to the old life he would go.

Snicker's Camp was reached in due time. He went to the best hotel, ordered supper, demolished it and went out for a stroll about the town. By the time he had looked the various buildings over, darkness was beginning to fall, and as the evening was warm he decided to go for a brief stroll to the grim hills which reared their heads in the air just back of the village.

He was well armed, but according to all accounts this did not count for much at Snicker's. It was a law-abiding place in all ways. It had no road-agents and few cut-throats. Now and then some miner overloaded with fire-water tried to play the brave, but nobody found it necessary to carry a belt full of revolvers, and bowies were at a discount.

Having received this information, Gilbert did not dream that he was daring danger by taking that stroll. If he had, it would have been all the same, for he had encountered foes, white and red, before that day, and knew how to use his weapons.

He went to an elevated position, sat down on a rock, lighted his pipe and fell into thought. Night had fairly fallen, though it was far from being a very dark one, and in the gloom he could see the lights of Snicker's Camp glimmering beyond and below his position.

Everywhere else all was dark and silent. The rugged hills stretched east and west, a desert lay to the north, while at the south was the town and its half-fertile, half-sandy plain—a scene well enough for a lover of solitude, but not calculated to excite admiration.

Gilbert smoked on placidly, enjoying himself with his black pipe as only the dweller in remote places can. He thought deeply while he smoked, but his reflections are not of importance to our story, so we need not record them.

It is a peculiarity of men who lead wild lives that they are always on the alert when apparently forgetful of danger; and thus it was that, even in the midst of reflections, Roland Gilbert suddenly sprang from the rock.

He had heard a footstep behind him—a soft, cautious movement, like that of a panther creeping on his prey, and it is always well to investigate such things in Arizona.

Gilbert's movement, however, was an unlucky one.

He struck his foot against a point of rock, fell, rolled over, and brought up in a niche among the bowlders; and, before he could regain his feet, he had a view of a dark form towering above him, and had a sight of a knife raised above his breast.

It was a critical moment in his career, for he could not slip away; but he was equal to the emergency.

Without attempting to arise, he caught the stranger by the legs below the knee, and with a quick pull brought him to the ground.

Both men scrambled up quickly—on equal terms at last—and then, without a word, they grappled like gladiators.

Gilbert had seen that his assailant had lost his knife, and he hoped to conquer him without loss of blood on either side.

In thus planning, he had relied on the muscle and skill he knew he possessed; but the first minute of the struggle convinced him he had met his equal in both respects. The unknown was strong and quick, and Gilbert was whirled about in a manner which surprised and confused him.

Worse was in store for him, for a scientific lock tore his feet from position, and down he went with his enemy on top of him, and the sinewy hands gripping his neck until they seemed liable to tear away every nerve and artery.

He heard a hissing curse, and recognized the Mexican pronunciation.

That settled the question in his mind. He might, rather than seem fretful, lie still and let an American choke him to death, but a Mexican—never!

He managed to thrust one hand inside his coat and draw his bowie, then, while the variegated lights of strangulation began to flash before his eyes, he struck upward, strong and true, the knife found a sheath in human flesh, blood gushed out over his hand, the would-be strangler groaned, relaxed his hold, and fell to the ground.

Gilbert sprang to his feet. The unknown lay before him, quiet except for his restlessly moving arms; but, as his conqueror looked, he made an attempt to rise.

Vain hope, for he fell back like a clod and lay moaning slightly.

The victor stood in irresolution. He knew not what to do or say. He had not desired this man's death, and, forgetting for the moment that it had been to save his own life, he regretted the blow.

Twice he spoke without receiving an answer, though the moaning had ceased, and then he was almost startled at hearing the man speak calmly, though faintly.

"Well, American, you have conquered," he said, and Gilbert saw his eyes fixed upon him. "I have heard of your fighting qualities before, and now I have seen to my cost. I am a dying man, but you need not exult. There are those to follow who will succeed where I have failed. You, too, are a doomed man, for the Scorpion Brothers never sleep."

"What do you mean?" demanded Gilbert. "Who are you, and why have you sought my life?"

"Can you not guess?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"I am one of the *Silver Scorpions*, and I glory in having lost my life in the service of that grand band. I am better off to-night than you, for I know my fate. You must live on to be hunted wherever you go, to know that the avenger is on your track, to shudder at every dark corner you pass, to see a foe in every one you meet, simply because you know the Scorpion Brothers are on your track. Aha! your end is near; the League has sworn to kill you and they never break an oath. You are doomed!"

"Good heavens! what is all this rubbish?" Gilbert demanded, in increased astonishment. "Who are the Silver Scorpions and why do they want my life? I never heard of them before, and I don't know how I've trod on any man's toes. What the dickens do you mean, anyhow?"

The wounded man had made a great effort, and raised himself on his elbow as Gilbert spoke. His wild gaze was fixed on his slayer's face in a burning gaze.

"Bend lower," he ordered, huskily.

Gilbert obeyed, and the unknown looked squarely into his face. Then an exclamation which was almost a groan fell from his lips.

"*Madre de Dios! the wrong man!*" he gasped.

The words were his last on earth. He fell back with a dull thud, lay silent and motionless, and when Gilbert bent nearer, he saw that he was dead.

Surprised and confused, the victor stood above him in deep thought. He had not the slightest idea who the man was or why he had sought his life. He had never heard of the Silver Scorpions, but the last words of the would-be assassin explained why that was so.

He had been mistaken and nearly killed for some other man's fault or misfortune—which, it was hard to say. In some way, this latter person had offended the Silver Scorpions, whoever they were, and only Gilbert's stout defense had saved him from falling victim to one of the League who mistook him for the other man.

Reflection did not seem likely to solve the mystery, so Gilbert went to the town, aroused some of the leading men and brought them to the scene of the fight. They examined the body by the light of their torches.

It was that of a man plainly a Mexican,

though he had a strong and resolute face. He was of middle age, plainly dressed, and though well supplied with money, without a paper to establish his identity.

Only one thing of interest was found. Suspended from his neck by a golden chain, was a most singular charm, talisman or whatever it was. It was of two parts, though the two were joined together as one.

The first was a red block, four inches long, half as wide and half an inch in thickness, and though none of them were able to determine the material, it looked like the red coral of the Mediterranean, the *Corallium nobile* of the scientific world.

Upon the face of this block was fastened an elaborately carved piece of silver, but its shape was most peculiar. At first sight it had seemed like a spider, but as it was more carefully observed, all recognized the form of the well-known reptile of the southwest—the scorpion.

All this at first seemed vague and foolish. The golden chain, the red block and the silver scorpion were out of keeping with so practical a place as Arizona, and, if seen under ordinary circumstances, would have been pronounced either the fanciful work of some cunning inventor or the toy of a madman.

In this case, however, it had a marked significance. The late owner of the article had spoken of the League of the Silver Scorpions, and he had shown that their purpose was dark and destructive. This curious thing, which he had worn suspended from his neck, was the sign of the order, whatever it was, and Gilbert's narrow escape forbade the idea of looking at it as a farce.

Scorpion Brothers were living creatures, full of venom as the reptiles from which they took their name, and evidently full of an earnest wish to accomplish the death of some man—the same for whom Gilbert had nearly died.

With nothing at hand to explain the mystery, he was voted excusable for his act, the Silver Scorpion was presented to him intact, and then the body was borne to the village to await a claimant.

None came, and on the second day the remains were buried outside the village, when Gilbert, who had already stayed longer than he wished, went on his way with the strange charm in his pocket. Lacking another owner, he was resolved to keep the proof of his adventure.

Had he remained one night longer he would then have learned that, during the period of darkness, the newly-made grave had been robbed of its tenant, and the body of the Mexican so completely spirited away that the people of Snicker's Camp never saw or heard of it again.

CHAPTER II.

A BRUSH WITH COMANCHES.

A MAN on a mustang, especially when the mustang is unnaturally homely, is neither a grand nor romantic object, and we would not ask the reader to turn his attention to such a spectacle had it not a direct bearing on our story.

The mustang must go undescribed, for we do not possess its pedigree, and the man needs no description. He is Roland Gilbert, looking exactly as he did when, a month before, he met with his adventure at Snicker's Camp. But he is no longer near that town—nor, indeed, in Arizona.

The scene is in Texas, a little back from the northern bank of the Rio Grande, but scarcely more than two miles from Mexican soil.

He no longer sees the bare and sandy plains of Arizona. Green and luxuriant grass is everywhere, groups of trees dot the prairie, and all tells of fertile land beneath his feet. He is on some of the best, though uncultivated, soil of the Lone Star State.

Reaching a slight rise of ground, he paused and looked around. The scene was the same—everywhere the wild, rich prairie; but he had expected more. Somewhere in that vicinity he expected to find the ranch of Morton Percival. If he had not mistaken his direction it ought to be near.

He had not forgotten his invitation to visit the place, received from the younger Percival when at Brick Bottom, and he had journeyed all the way from Arizona to visit him at his home near the Rio Grande.

That part of Texas was but sparsely settled at the day of which we write. Villages were few and far between, and the few inhabitants who were bold enough to push out and take their risks had to go armed at all times to protect themselves from the Indians and their equally lawless neighbors across the Rio Grande—the Mexicans.

Gilbert knew all this, but he had been indifferent to danger as he rode forward, and even as he sat on the rise of land before mentioned, he grew surprised when, warned by the movements of his mustang, he looked around to see a score of Indians dashing toward him from the cover of a motte.

"Comanches!" he ejaculated, with a whistle.

"This is not not the kind of a reception I expected or hanker after. What the deuce shall I do?"

He remained perfectly cool, though well aware that he was in a tight place. There was about one chance in fifty that the red-skins were less venomous than they looked. If they were as bad as they seemed, he had a large prospect of losing his scalp. His mustang could not outrun theirs, and in a fight one man don't stand much chance against twenty.

Still, Roland Gilbert unslung his rifle and kept his ground grimly. If he went over the divide, he would make a heavy bid for company on the journey.

Crack!

It was the clear ring of a rifle, but not that of Gilbert's, nor yet from the red band. It had come from a point more to the east, but the target covered was soon made plain to all. One of the Comanches went off his horse in an ungraceful way, shot through the heart.

Then, close on the heels of the first shot, came two more, starting not far from the first, and two more Indians fell.

The advance of the band lost its rapidity, the red-skins wavered, looked closely toward the point of danger and seemed to be losing heart. They had cause for apprehension; their trouble, bad as it had been, was only beginning. From the tall grass came shot after shot, until it seemed as though a whole army was working against them.

"Rangers, by Jupiter!" exclaimed Gilbert. "I'll help in a good cause."

He covered a Comanche, fired and dropped him on the prairie, and then the survivors lost all ambition for a fight, wheeled their horses and darted away followed by a few shots from their unseen enemies.

Gilbert reloaded his rifle and, seeing that their retreat was a genuine one, looked for those who had given him such timely aid.

Not a person was visible, and the firing had entirely ceased.

"Why don't they show themselves?" he wondered. "They've won a complete victory, and Texan Rangers are not usually bashful about appearing in public. I reckon I had better look them up."

He rode slowly toward the concealed marksmen, and, when half the distance had been passed, three persons arose from cover.

The first was a man of massive build, whose dress was that of the border—a genuine Texan, if appearances went for anything; but at the others Gilbert looked in wonder.

No broad-shouldered Rangers were they, with a look like that of bravos, but both young and handsome women. He was sure they were handsome, even then, and their garb was so novel and picturesque that their appearance was heightened to a degree which made him dumb from wonder.

They came slowly toward him, but the man, moving faster, was the first to gain speaking distance.

"Hallo!" he genially said. "How do you stand their pressure, stranger?"

"Everything seems to be well, thanks to you," Gilbert managed to say.

"We did give them all they could carry," the Texan said with a chuckle. "No doubt the skunks thought thar was an army in the grass."

"How many men have you?"

"Not a man, except myself. You look surprised, stranger, but et's even so. Me an' my girls did it all. Look at this rifle, will ye? It's a repeater, good fur sixteen shots, an' them females have ther same kind. Yas, we did et all, but it are nothin'. When Buck Butler an' his family get on ther war path, hair has got ter fly, ev'ry time. Cubs, come this way."

The speaker motioned and the girls came forward, smiling, and showing an easy composure which was just far enough from boldness to make Gilbert admire them the more. He could not do otherwise than admire them, for they were fair of face and perfect of form.

As they were much alike, one description will answer for both. Dark-brown hair, large dark eyes, plump, sun-browned cheeks, white, perfect teeth—the two were very pretty with their handsome faces and well-rounded forms.

Their apparel was well-suited to the border, the dark-brown dresses revealing Indian moccasins on their feet and all very plain except for the beads arranged in rows, here and there. On their heads they wore white hats, and the rifles in their hands, though small, looked capable of doing good service.

"Hyar you see ther army that put ther Ki-manches ter flight—Buck Butler an' his brigade. These hyar are my darters, Joan and Jean, or my cubs, as I usually call 'em. Look at 'em wal, stranger, fur they are Butlers all through."

"Don't get ridiculous, Father Butler," said one of the two, with assumed severity. "You have a way of saying too much about your cubs. Beware, lest we turn the tables and tell this gentleman what Buck Butler is, in the Rio Grande region."

"I am sure you can neither of you tell anything not creditable," Gilbert hastened to say. "Father wouldn't dare to, and we are too

dutiful," declared the girl, looking at her sturdy parent with very friendly eyes.

"You're the worry of my life, you an' Jean," declared the man. "Don't I have to watch you all ther time?"

"It's the only way you keep out of danger," retorted Jean. "But, why should we intrude our family quarrels on this gentleman? He will turn his back on us in alarm yet. He must already think us Amazons."

"Let me explain," said Joan. "It's the stranger's only hope. You have learned all our names already, sir, but you must mingle with our neighbors to learn just what Buck Butler is. A Texan Ranger, he is the king of this region and always leads the men when they arise against the Comanches or Mexicans. He is a dead shot, and has made his daughters almost his equals. Jean and I know nothing of pianos, but by the music of our rifles we can guard our lives against foes, red or white."

Gilbert hastened to add that they seemed able to save the lives of other people, judging by what he had himself seen, and then the trio dropped their bantering talk and allspoke more seriously.

Buck Butler was a noted man along the Rio Grande at that day. He lived in a small house on the banks of a tributary of the larger river, having no family except his two daughters. Circumstances often compelled him to leave them alone at the house, but they were as well able to care for themselves as the majority of men.

He had brought them up with the rifle and revolver for playthings, and how well they could use them Gilbert had already seen.

On this occasion, the Butlers had been out on the prairie when they saw the Comanches and, not desiring an encounter, had taken cover in the grass; but when the red warriors took a notion to confiscate the scalp of a white man, they had promptly taken part in the affair, and used their repeating-rifles so well that a complete victory had been secured.

"Morton Percival's house is two mild away," said Buck, in answer to an inquiry. "I kin guide you thar ef you wish, but I like ther cut o' your figger-head, an' would like ter see you at my castle first. What say?"

"I'll go," said Gilbert, quickly. "I am in no particular hurry to reach Percival's, and I want to see something of the life of Texan Rangers. Maybe you'll show me, in the days to come."

Buck heartily answered that he would, and then they turned their faces south, paying no further attention to the red victims of their rifles.

Gilbert was in a quandary. He felt that he ought to offer his mustang to one of the girls, but he knew not which one to choose.

He managed to make a skillful and impartial offer of the homely animal, but both girls declined to ride.

He feared that they were not pleased with the mustang's outward appearance, but had to accept their statement that they preferred walking.

They reached the house at the end of half an hour.

It was a stout structure, built between two large trees, with the prairie on three sides and the river on the fourth. There were places in the sides that looked like loop-holes, and on the walls more than one mark that must have been made by flying bullets.

They entered, and Gilbert saw a neat but plainly-furnished interior.

So far he was charmed with his new acquaintances.

He had seen wild life in Arizona, California, old and New Mexico, and at last he was having experience with one of the world-renowned Texan Rangers.

The fact gave him pleasure, and he exerted himself to be agreeable after the straightforward, manly fashion of the frontier.

And, in turn, his new acquaintances made him feel wholly at home, and told him much about the vicinity.

CHAPTER III.

MAD TOM, THE ROVER.

AN hour passed quickly and pleasantly. Gilbert saw that, hard fighter though Buck Butler might be, he was kind-hearted and genial among his friends, and he plainly adored his daughters. This was not to be wondered at, for they were in every way pleasant and attractive girls. Their wild dresses covered warm hearts, and though they were more accustomed to the use of the rifle than the work usually practiced by their sex, there was nothing coarse or forward about them.

Gilbert was of the opinion that he had made valuable acquaintances, but it remained for the future to show just what would come of that meeting.

Butler was the acknowledged chief of the Rangers, in the vicinity, but it was so seldom they were called to the field that he had ample time for hunting, scouting, and home pleasure. When the Comanches started on a raid, or the Mexican cattle-thieves crossed the river, however, the Rangers would quickly arise and Buck would take the lead.

A Ranger-at-large, he called himself, and Gilbert could plainly see that he would make a bad enemy when once aroused.

Anon, Buck announced that he would go out with his rifle and secure material for supper. He did not ask his guest to accompany him, and Roland felt just as well satisfied to remain with the girls. Like most men, he had a weakness for female society, and he was already deeply interested in these fair daughters of the prairie.

Buck, however, only went to the door and turned about with a laugh.

"Cubs," he said, "come hyar. Mad Tom is on ther hoof an' you kin hev a good view on him. Take a look, stranger?"

Both girls had hastened to the door at the first call, and Gilbert now followed. Once there, he directed his gaze toward the common point of interest.

A hundred yards away, but moving in a course which, if continued, would take him near the front of the house, Gilbert saw a man of strange appearance. A closer view was needed to distinguish all of his peculiarities, for at that distance he most resembled a bundle of rags propelled by a long staff.

"Can't you call him?" asked Jean, eagerly.

"I kin try, but I warn ye, cub, that he can't come inter this family as a lover. You hear m'?"

"Don't be foolish," said the girl, with assumed severity.

"Who is he?" asked Gilbert, who was growing more interested and puzzled as the stranger advanced.

"A critter that nobody knows. He wanders about ther kentry, dressed as you see, an' calls himself Tom, the Rover. He is way-off in his brain-pan an' talks without sense, an' folks, actin' on ther idee that he is part crazy and part fool, hev giv' him sech names as 'Mad Tom,' 'Half-witted Tom,' an' ther like. He goes an' comes as he likes, fur he knows enough ter take keer o' himself and never was knowed to hurt anybody. If I kin get him ter stop, you shall see what Mad Tom is."

"Speak to him kindly, father," said Jean. "I want to hear what he will say."

"Ther cubs hev never speechified ter him, though they have seen him a good 'eal on ther prairie. He is shy as a deer, at times, but now an' then he gets in a talkin' mood an' his tongue goes like a wind-mill. He sees us now, an' I reckon he is not in a skeery mood."

All our friends had stepped outside the cabin, and Gilbert, at least, was looking at the strange man in surprise. He was a creature new to the Tex n prairie, though Gilbert had seen his prototype upon the stage of Eastern cities.

In form, he was above the medium hight and not particularly broad of shoulders, but his compact, well-rounded frame indicated good health and considerable strength. He wore a short beard and long, black hair, the latter being tangled in every conceivable way and twisted with tufts of prairie grass.

His dress was the wildest of all. He wore what had been made for a hunting-suit, but decay had seized upon and ruined it. It hung loosely about him, so ragged and torn that it was a wonder it clung to his person. Both sleeves of his coat were gone to the elbow, and his pants reaching scarcely below the knee, showed well-worn Indian moccasins on his feet.

Gilbert had never seen so ragged a man before, but the whole is not yet told. Around his waist was tied a piece of lasso, and in this novel belt was stuck long bunches of prairie-grass which half-concealed his rags and shape. In one hand he carried another bunch of grass and in the other a long, crooked staff.

As we have said, Gilbert had seen something very like this upon the Eastern stage, and, unless it was a similarity of accident, he knew the man had copied from Edgar, in Shakespeare's play.

As he came forward, looking sharply at the group, Gilbert saw signs of natural intelligence in his face, but his eyes had a wild gleam which bespoke mental derangement.

"Hello!" said Buck, genially, "where are you bound, Tom?"

"Where others never go," the man answered, quickly, and speaking in a deep, tragic voice. "It may be on the level prairie, or through dark river and quivering quicksand. Even the foul fiend does not know my secrets."

"Are you not tired?" Jean asked.

"It matters not if I am. None of us can rest until our missions are fulfilled."

"Have you a mission?"

"Aha! have I not? Ay, we all have missions, and Tom's is not that of a child. But the secret of it all is locked in my head and men shall never know its purpose. But why do you ask? Leave Tom alone and all will be well.—Stay, good people, one question."

The man's solemn air suddenly changed to one of earnestness. He changed his wisp of straw into the same hand with his staff and held out his empty fingers quiveringly.

"Speak on," said Buck. "I'll tell ye, ef I kin."

"Have you seen the foul fiend?—he who courses through the air on a chariot impelled

by seething water and devouring flame, who rides rough-shod over human heads and hearts? Have you seen a lone horseman on a horse of gray, or a witch riding on a broomstick? Have you seen a vision of rats, or tree-toads arranged in battle-array?"

"Can't say that I hev. None o' these things have passed this way."

"Beware of them when you see them. Trust them not. Put faith in no man, doubt your own heart; hide your gold in secret places and lock your barn before the horse is stolen. Do all this and all will be well. Hide when the foul fiend approaches, and think of Poor Tom. You have daughters fair and worldly. Look well to them. Children in this age are not dutiful. They smile and smile, but their hearts are bad."

"Have you children?" demanded Jean, a little vexed at having his remarks turned upon her.

"I have nothing but what you see here. What more do I need? What would the Rover of the Prairie do with jewels and gold? Ha! ha! I have enough here, and here!"

He struck his hand first upon his head and then upon his breast. Next, he took the bunch of grass again in his left hand, leaned upon his staff and muttered in his deep, tragic way:

"Poor Tom's a-cold! Poor Tom's a-cold!"

Joan and Jean looked at Gilbert, but his attention was all on the unfortunate being before him. His intelligent face, his use of the English language, his darkened mind—all seemed to speak of the wreck of a man intended by Nature for better things. He felt drawn toward him, and was about to step forward to his side when an exclamation from Buck caused him to look around.

Another person was approaching the cabin. All had been watching the Rover so closely that they had not had eyes for anything else, and the last comer was so near that Gilbert could see he was a small-sized, dark-complexioned man, well armed and mounted on a fine horse.

"A Greaser!" muttered Buck, suspiciously.

The man advanced and stopped his horse near the group. He had keen eyes and had used them well, surveying each person sharply, but finally resting his gaze on Butler.

"Pardon me, senor," he said, blandly, "but will you direct me toward Danby?"

"Foller yer nose an' you'll get there," said Buck, gruffly.

"How far have I to travel?"

"Three mild. Go straight through yender woods as the crow flies."

The Mexican fixed his gaze on Tom.

"My good fellow, can I hire you to guide me?" he asked.

"Ask of the winds, for I am no servant. Spur your horse and ride before the foul fiend gets you. Hasten! Get you gone. Poor Tom's a-cold!"

"I will pay you well," added the Mexican, hesitatingly.

"He won't go," said Buck, crossly. "You ain't in Mexico, now, an' our beggars are high-toned. Leave Tom with his fancies and his foul fiend."

"Ha!" suddenly cried the Rover. "See them crawl! I will beat them to a jelly. Ha! I have them now. There, and there and there!"

With each word the Rover beat the ground with his staff and then brushed aside his imaginary victims. Suddenly he erected his head and looked at Buck.

"Beware of men and women, beware of the foul fiend, beware of everything!" he warningly said; then, before any one could answer, he wheeled and strode away toward the river.

"Let him go," said Buck; "it's his way."

The Mexican touched his forehead.

"He is not right here," he said.

"Likely he ain't, but I'm no dictionary. Let's adjourn ther meetin'."

The Mexican said adieu in his bland way, touched his horse and rode off. Buck looked after him with a scowl.

"He's a Greaser, an' I hate all o' his kind," he said, sourly. "They are boss-thieves an' thieves in general. What is that critter doin' hyar? I never see'd one on 'em on Texan soil but harm came on't. I'll bet he means mischief."

"You are prejudiced, Father Butler," said Joan.

"Then you are, too, cub. You don't like 'em any better than I do. But never mind; I'll go an' shoot something while you get ther pot a-b'ilin'."

He went away, while the trio he left, after a glance at the galloping Mexican, looked again after Mad Tom.

He had gone to the bank of the river and could be seen gazing intently into the water. He made a wild and strange appearance, with his rags and ornaments of straw; but Gilbert felt a sadness for which he could scarcely account.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PERCIVALS.

ROLAND GILBERT made his supper with the Butlers and rode on toward his destination. Buck had warmly invited him to call again, and there was no doubt but what the invitation would be remembered. As short a time as he

had been on Texan soil, Gilbert had made friends in whom he was interested, and he felt that they were true as steel.

Darkness was falling when he neared Morton Percival's home, and he began to feel a natural embarrassment about calling. His acquaintance with Giles had been brief, and, though cordially invited to make the visit, over a month had elapsed since he had seen or heard from him, and he feared his friendship might have cooled.

The house proved to be the largest he had yet seen in Texas, and its solid, substantial look bespoke the wealth and taste of its owner.

His doubts were soon dispelled. His summons at the door was answered by a servant, but when he asked for the younger Percival, Giles promptly made his appearance. He had not changed materially since the day when they beat off the road-agents from the cover of the stage, except that his dress had been improved.

He was still the same handsome, strong-faced man who had handled his revolvers so well in the Arizona hills.

Gilbert was warmly greeted, his horse sent away by a servant, and then the two young men entered the house.

Giles explained that the other members of the family—his father and sister—were away for the evening, and then he devoted himself to the work of entertaining his guest with such success that the last of the latter's doubts vanished.

He talked over their Arizona experience and spoke of the future. Giles had been warmly welcomed when he returned from his long wandering, and everything belonging to the ranch had been placed at his disposal. He now spoke of the long rides and hunts they would have on the prairie—possibly a ride with the Rangers—and various other matters which interested Gilbert.

Pleasantly enough the evening passed, but as the elder Percival and Nida were late in returning, the guest retired without seeing them.

He had been conducted to a large, pleasant room, and when Giles left him, he sat down at the open window, and, looking out on the prairie, reflected for some time. He anticipated a good deal of pleasure during the days to come, and already began to feel that it would be one of the most enjoyable events in his wandering life.

After a while he closed the window and prepared to retire. While thus engaged, something led him to take from his pocket the peculiar memento of his adventure at Snicker's Camp. He had carried it ever since that night, and, though he never expected to know the meaning attached to it, had valued it as a strange curiosity.

Holding it near the light, he turned it over and over in his hand. It was as he had first seen it—the red block and the silver figure of the scorpion. There was something very realistic about the figure, and as he reflected on the deadly nature of the creature it represented, he felt that the League of the Scorpion Brothers must be one of a fixed and resolute purpose.

Who were they? He had asked the question many times, both of himself and others, but no one knew aught of the organization. Their sign, however, lay in his hand, and he fell to wondering if those who lived knew aught of the fate of the one who died near Snicker's Camp.

He had never heard that the lonely grave had been mysteriously opened and robbed of its occupant.

"On the whole, I'm rather glad I am out of their territory," he thought. "Others of the band might see fit to mistake me for some one else, or to avenge their brother, but here in Texas they probably do not have silver scorpions."

He put the trophy of his victory back in his pocket, undressed and went to bed.

Several hours passed, but, wearied by his long ride, Gilbert slept soundly. Midnight came and passed, and the small hours of morning began passing away.

Sound as was his sleep, he was not beyond the power of hearing. His life of adventure had brought to him the habit of being on his guard even when asleep, and, after a while, his eyes opened. He lay perfectly still, but he had an impression that he had been awakened by some unnatural cause and wondered what it was.

He was not long in learning. Just beyond the bed he heard a soft, rustling sound as of some one cautiously moving, and then followed an unmistakable footfall—cautious and soft, but audible to his keen hearing.

Without a movement of his body, he slid his hand under the pillow and drew forth his revolver. Then, in the old Arizona style, he lowly but clearly spoke:

"Hands up, there! Who the dickens are you?"

No answer came. The cautious movements had ceased and not a sound broke the silence. Gilbert lay still for a moment, so that his own movements might not drown any the intruder might make, and then coolly cocked his revolver.

"Speak out, I say. I mean business and you must fall into line. Who are you?"

Still no answer, only dead silence.

Gilbert swung out of bed with a single movement.

"By Jupiter; this won't work. I'll try a match on you and see—"

The sentence was never finished. Something fell on his head with stunning force and he dropped back on the bed, motionless and unconscious.

He knew no more for half an hour. When his senses came back he was in utter darkness and quiet. His head ached dully, however, and he was not long in remembering what had occurred. He quickly arose, found a match and struck a light.

Except for his own presence, the room was without a human occupant. Everything seemed as he had left them when first he retired. His clothing hung over a chair where he had thrown it with the carelessness peculiar to men; his costly watch ticked steadily from the table.

Nothing seemed disturbed.

Remembering that his revolver had been in his hand when he was stricken down, he looked on the floor and on the bed, but it was not visible. He continued the search for some time before he thought to look beneath the pillow. There, lying exactly as he had left it when he first retired, was the missing weapon.

His face grew blank. Had his adventure been but the wild fancy of a dream? He almost thought so for a moment, but the pain remained in his head, and when he went to a glass he saw a slight abrasion of the scalp near the top of his skull.

That discovery removed his last doubt. Some one had been in his room, and that person, when discovered, had knocked him senseless—sure sign that the intruder had been no friend.

He hastened to examine his pocket-book and found his money undisturbed. He went to the door and found it still locked, with the key on the inside. The window was the only remaining mode of entrance, and he knew this was low enough to have been reached by means of a ladder.

Considerably perplexed, he lighted his pipe and sat down to reflect. His room had been entered by some one who had not been a friend, unless friendship assumed peculiar forms in Texas, but the object of the intrusion was not plain. Certainly it had not been robbery, for his money and watch would in that case have been taken.

Who, then, had been the intruder, and what his object?

Reflection did not make the mystery less dense, and Gilbert finally fastened his window and again retired, ending the night as peacefully as though nothing out of the ordinary channel of events had occurred.

In the morning he felt no ill effects from the blow he had received. He had just finished dressing when Giles knocked at the door and the young men met cordially. The host inquired if his guest had slept well, and was answered affirmatively. Gilbert had decided to wait a few hours before mentioning his adventure.

Then they went below and Gilbert met the elder Percival and Miss Nida. The former was an intelligent-looking man of at least sixty years, looking much like Giles except for the difference in age, and his manner was that of a man who is conscious that he has enough of worldly goods but is not unduly proud of the fact.

The daughter of the house was a beauty. Gilbert mutely acknowledged that at first glance, and he never had reason to change his opinion. She was four or five years younger than Giles and a glorious type of womanhood. A brunette, she had black hair which curled slightly and was rich and abundant, dark, handsome eyes, a perfectly rounded face and a complexion which, though somewhat browned by prairie suns and winds, was still clear and becoming.

She differed from the dashing daughters of Buck Butler in that her dress was more civilized and her manner more reserved and conventional, but she was frank and pleasant, her smile was dazzling, and Gilbert inwardly decided that Giles Percival was fortunate in having such a sister.

After a short conversation, they went to the breakfast table, and, after the meal was finished, back to the sitting-room. Each one of the trio seemed anxious to make the guest feel at home, and he fell into the family circle with the ease of a man who is master of himself.

"We are all glad to see you," said Mr. Percival, with frank hospitality. "Our prodigal has been so long away from home, that we are glad to welcome him and all his acquaintances."

"Don't make it too strong, father," said Giles, laughing. "You do not know what disreputable ones I may have formed."

"If you have any, then you are not a true Percival," declared the elder man. "It isn't the way of our family. Yes, Mr. Gilbert, you are welcome, and I hope you will enjoy yourself. Hunting is good, and as you are a lover of wild life, you may yet have a chance to fight

the Comanches or ride with the Rangers against the Mexican cattle-thieves."

"I met some of your lions, yesterday, in the shape of a band of Comanches and Buck Butler," said Gilbert.

"Did you see his daughters?" Giles demanded with increased animation. "But I had forgotten—you said you had supper there. Charming girls, they are, and almost as good borderers as their father. I've called there twice and intend to call again."

"I believe you are fascinated, Giles," said his sister, with a light laugh.

"Deeply wounded, we will call it. The girls are not the kind that we find in Eastern ball-rooms, but they are pretty, modest enough and sensible. That's the kind we want on the Texan frontier."

CHAPTER V.

THE COLONEL'S JAGUAR-HUNT.

CONVERSATION continued in a lively manner until one of the servants appeared to announce another caller. The Percivals, by the way, employed quite a force of men in various capacities on the ranch and in the house, the latter division being composed of two persons of each sex.

The one who had appeared at this juncture was a girl, not over twenty years of age, and quite pretty. She looked like a Mexican, with a dash of Indian blood, and Gilbert wondered to see her employed at a place where Mexicans were neither loved nor esteemed, but he made no comment.

Her name, it seemed from the way Percival addressed her, was Paula, and it needed but one glance at her brilliant eyes and small, shrewd face to discover that she was possessed of a keen, strong mind.

However, she was merely directed to admit the caller, who was announced as "Colonel Mariot," and then she retired, and the colonel came instead.

Gilbert saw a man of large form, a ponderous head, heavy features, black hair, beard and eyes, and a nervous manner. He looked like a Frenchman, his name gave strength to the idea, and when he spoke his accent verified what Gilbert had at first suspected.

"Ah! my friends," he said, in a quick, energetic manner, "I am pleased to see you all so well. Don't tell me I rush to conclusions; your looks are enough to settle the question. Good health is a blessing, and I am glad you have it. Do you think me an early caller? Your pardon, but I have news for my friend, the late wanderer."

While speaking so rapidly, the eyes of the new-comer had been moving restlessly. He scanned each face in turn, dwelling longest on that of Gilbert, but what he thought could not be told by his own countenance. His tongue and eyes were quick and nervous, but in the midst of it all his heavy features remained impassive. He was trying to smile, to be pleasant, but there was only a slight curving of his mouth to indicate the fact.

"I hope the Greasers have stolen a hundred head of cattle from somebody," said Giles, indolently. "I am anxious to ride with Buck Butler's band. But, colonel, we are forgetting one thing—I have a friend here. Mr. Gilbert, our neighbor, Colonel Mariot."

"A pleasant meeting, sir, I assure you," said Mariot, giving Roland his hand. "We shall be good friends, I know."

His lip curved and his eyes smiled, but his face remained impassive, and his broad hand lay lifeless in that of Gilbert. Singular as it may be, the latter already disliked and distrusted this flippant-spoken colonel. There seemed to be no response from his heart to his words; like coffee ground in a mill, there seemed an unbridged gulf between the two.

Despite this impression, Gilbert made a fitting reply. Mariot released his hand, accepted a chair and allowed his glib tongue full play. He did not, however, forget the errand upon which he had come.

"Do you want to use your rifle, *mon ami*?" he asked, turning abruptly to Giles.

"Always ready, colonel. What is in the wind?"

"One of my herdsmen met a jaguar in the south forest, yesterday, and did not come home alone. His companions brought him in a good deal gashed and utterly bloodless. I doubt if he recovers, and I pant for revenge. I want the jaguar's skin for the poor fellow to lie upon while his wounds are tender."

"A capital idea, colonel, and I take it you want my help. Is it to be a grand turn-out or a select affair?"

"Many are not needed. I will take two or three of my herdsmen, and you—"

"He paused, glanced at Gilbert, and added:

"Perhaps your friend would like to be one of us."

"Count me in, by all means," said Roland, quickly. "It will be the first step in our sport, Giles."

"Sport, if we only hunt the jaguar; little sport if he hunts us," said Mariot, dryly, reminding them of the old saying.

"We'll run the risk, anyway," added Giles.

And so it was settled. They agreed to meet the colonel at a designated point and time that afternoon, and then he took his departure.

When he was gone Gilbert learned more about him. A Frenchman by birth, he had come to the United States when the civil war began as a soldier of fortune. He had offered his services to the North, had served through the war, and won a colonel's commission. Since that time he had been on the southwest border and in Mexico, and for a year had been on a ranch adjoining that of the Percivals.

The elder Percival spoke of him as a gentleman who seemed honest and kind-hearted, but Gilbert, who already disliked the man, wondered if there should not have been an emphasis on the word "seemed," and Nida made no comments.

The forenoon was spent in preparing for the jaguar-hunt and in pleasant conversation. Gilbert was feeling contented and at peace with the whole world. He liked the Percivals, one and all, and a little private conversation with Nida showed her to be as well-informed and intelligent as her brother.

It was a family that, whatever might come of the future, impressed one very favorably at the start.

Giles and Roland kept their appointment with the colonel, and met him as agreed upon. He had brought two of his men, so the party numbered five in all.

The South Forest, as Mariot and others called it, was an extensive piece of wood lying between the ranch of the latter and the Rio Grande, and about three miles from Percival's house. It was partially a swamp, with knolls between the lower places, abounded in game and was thickly wooded.

The chances of finding the particular jaguar which had used the herdsman so roughly were not great, but it is the nature of man to feel a good deal relieved if he can give blow for blow, even if he does not hit the right head.

Without much delay the party moved toward the wood with the herdsmen in advance and others close behind. The colonel was in his usual animated mood, and he sustained the burden of conversation as they moved forward.

The edge of the forest was reached in due time; but, without pausing, they went on to the scene of the jaguar's assault. There were stains of blood on the leaves and signs of a struggle, for the herdsman had fought hard, but the jaguar had deserted the ground.

"We will now separate and move forward in four parties," said Mariot. "My men here do not aspire to hunt singly, so they can go together and draw courage from each other. The rest of us, I think, will prefer to do our own work in our own way."

"Certainly," said Giles. "Let us spread out and cover as much ground as possible, and then, if a shot is heard, let all make for that spot. This campaign, you know, is solely against the jaguar army. All other game is to be passed by unmolested."

After some further conversation they advanced, as has been said, each party about fifty yards from his nearest ally, Giles and the colonel each having a flank, with Roland next to Mariot and the herdsmen next partners for Giles.

Gilbert moved along a level space for a hundred yards and then across a swamp. He kept close watch for jaguars, but not an animal crossed his path, and he soon decided that it was a poor day for any kind of hunting. Half a mile had been covered and not a shot fired.

Anon Gilbert reached a knoll which was well covered with large trees but free from underbrush. He had not seen any of his companions for some time, and he paused on the elevated land to look for them.

The herdsmen were not visible.

Looking to the left, however, he saw the colonel, and with him was another man, who was not one of the hunting party. They were standing side by side and talking earnestly, but Gilbert was about to pass on when he was struck by a familiarity in the appearance of the unknown man.

He looked more closely, puzzled at first to know where he had seen him, but the truth suddenly occurred to him. The man was the same horseman who had passed Buck Butler's cabin on the previous day—the Mexican who wished to reach Danby.

Gilbert felt a little surprised at seeing him there, but as there was nothing strange about it when he remembered that the wood was common hunting-ground, he moved on across the knoll and into another swamp.

Still there was not a shot from the hunters. The jaguar they wanted, and the jaguars against which they had no particular spite, had either gone to other fields of usefulness or retired to the cover of their homes.

Gilbert began the ascent of another knoll. He was half-way up when he saw the figure of a man moving through the bushes. It was impossible to recognize him at that distance, and partially covered by the bushes as he was, but as he was a little to the left, the observer decided that it must be Mariot.

Then he saw the unknown sink upon his knees and thrust out his rifle ahead of him. Gilbert

paused, for the movement indicated that a shot was about to follow. The marksman glanced along the rifle-barrel and seemed taking sure aim.

His finger did not press the trigger, however. Beyond the brow of the hill two shots suddenly sounded, the second ringing out like an echo of the first.

Gilbert had no means of knowing who fired, but he suddenly uttered an exclamation of horror.

The man whom he had seen, but who had not fired, threw up his arms with a sudden jerk, and then fell over backward, crashing among the bushes.

"Good Heavens! Mariot is shot!" exclaimed Gilbert, speaking under the belief that the man was indeed the colonel.

Then he dashed toward the scene of the tragedy at full speed, thinking only of the unexpected turn the hunt had taken; but before he was half-way, two other shots sounded in quick succession from the further side of the knoll.

Evidently some one was doing execution there, but Gilbert, who had not hunted with any of them, had no means of recognizing the reports.

All this did not turn him from his original errand, but another man was before him in reaching the scene of the tragedy.

A tall form dashed through the bushes, and bent over the fallen man, and Gilbert recognized Colonel Mariot.

Who, then, had been the victim?

He reached the spot, and found Mariot bending over what was plainly no more than lifeless clay.

A man lay on the fallen leaves, with blood collecting by his side, but sense and life were forever gone.

In that unfortunate being Gilbert recognized the mysterious Mexican.

"Is he dead?" Roland quickly asked.

CHAPTER VI.

A MYSTERIOUS SHOT.

THE colonel's face was calm, and he had not started in the least when addressed.

"He is no more than a clod," he returned, without emotion. "The bullet went through his heart, and he never knew what hurt him."

"Who fired it?"

"Probably it was an accidental shot. Do you know this man?"

"No."

"Nor I. He is a total stranger."

"Isn't he the same one with whom I saw you talking back at the other knoll?" Gilbert asked, in surprise.

"Oh! yes," answered the colonel, carelessly. "I met him there, and he asked the way to Danby; then he moved on, and I saw him no more until I heard the shot, his fall, and your rush."

Just then another rifle-crack sounded beyond the knoll.

"They are busy there," said Mariot, quickly. "It is doubtless a jaguar. One of us ought to go to their aid, while the other remains here."

"You may stay," said Gilbert. "I'll go and see if I can help, and then lead our friends back."

Without waiting for an answer, he ran up the knoll, over the top, and down the other side, but he had not gone far before he saw Giles Percival and the herdsmen standing together, their rifles in their hands, and their manner that of victors.

He pushed further forward, and saw at their feet the body of a jaguar. Dangerous enough he had been in life, but with the blood oozing from two rifle wounds, his power of mischief was forever past.

"You have secured him," said Gilbert, exultantly.

"Yes," said Giles, quietly, "and his mate lies over yonder."

Looking where he pointed, Gilbert saw another jaguar a few yards away, and then Giles explained what had occurred. He had seen one of the two upon the branch of a tree and dropped him by a single shot, but he soon found that at least one more of the family was abroad.

A second beast had appeared, mad for revenge, and, only for good work with his repeating rifle, the hunter would have fared badly. As it was, he could boast of having fairly slain two of the hardest-lived and most dangerous animals of Texas.

"But didn't I hear a shot from the knoll just as I pulled the trigger the first time?" Giles asked.

"Yes," answered Gilbert, "and the ball found human game."

"Not Colonel Mariot?"

"No; an unknown man, who now lies dead in the bushes. Who he was is a mystery, and who fired the shot is still deeper one. Come with me and I will show you."

They went back to the knoll and found the colonel watching by the corpse. He looked at Giles with his half-smile.

"Here is a mystery for you to solve, Percival. This man seems to be a stranger about here,

but he has been shot, either deliberately or by accident, and it is our duty to discover who fired the fatal bullet."

"He was hit in the breast," added Gilbert, "and as the colonel and myself were both behind him, it proves that we are not guilty."

"The herdsmen were some distance to my right," said Giles, thoughtfully, "for I had gone faster than any of you and walked around them. The shot, if the one I heard was that which killed him, as of course it was, was fired from a point between the victim and where I stood. It looks to me as though the marksman must have been one not of our party."

"That is certainly the fact," Mariot agreed, "but who was that man and why does he not appear?"

It was a question not easily answered. They made a thorough search of the vicinity without discovering any one, and when they looked for a trail it proved to be too obscure for their skill. Had Buck Butler been there, the result might have been different, but they finally reassembled at the scene of the tragedy, baffled and perplexed.

Unfortunate men seldom get a great amount of sympathy from strangers, and no tears were shed over this dead man. Probably if the herdsmen had spoken their minds they would have expressed utter indifference, for they had no love for Mexicans, collectively or individually.

Still, humanity required something of the party, and the herdsmen were left to watch by the body while Colonel Mariot rode to Danby and notified the authorities.

Giles and Roland went back to the Percival ranch and told of the death of the jaguars, but the former kept the news of the tragedy from his father and sister.

Later in the day he rode to Danby, to which place the body had been carried, and Gilbert was left to the company of Nida.

The arrangement did not annoy him in the least. Like the majority of men, he was not averse to the society of a pretty girl, and, finding that Miss Percival was remarkably intelligent and well-informed, he became so interested that time passed rapidly.

At twilight Giles had not returned and Roland went out for a lonely ramble. Near the rear of the house was a group of live oak trees, and, after looking them well over, he lay down on the grass, lighted his pipe and fell into thought.

He was soon so deeply engaged on the mystery of the day that he did not suspect the proximity of another person until a tall form suddenly appeared in front of him. He looked up with a start, but grew calmer as he recognized the man he had seen at Buck Butler's cabin—Mad Tom.

The Rover appeared as before, ragged, wild, bristling with long grass, and armed with his crooked staff.

"Good-evening," said Gilbert, kindly.

"Who speaks to Poor Tom?" demanded the man, in a deep, hoarse voice. "Are you here to drive the Rover away? Is it not enough that he must wander, wander, wander always? Ha! you know not the ways of a fool. Give pity to Poor Tom, whom the foul fiend pursues through chaparral and across prairie."

He was looking at Gilbert in a wild, frightened way, but the latter arose, approached him and spoke soothingly.

"Have no fear, Tom, for I am your friend. I will drive the foul fiend away and help you. Have you wandered far to-day?"

"A thousand good miles as the crow flies. My feet have pressed the burning sands and the pointed rocks. There is no rest for Poor Tom. Who are you and why are you here?"

The Rover changed his tone and spoke sharply, even fiercely.

"My name is Roland Gilbert, and I am visiting at yonder house," answered the other, willing to humor the madman.

"You had better be in a den of rattlesnakes."

"Do you know them?"

"Ay, that I do, root and branch. What I do not know of them is not worth knowing. Listen to me, for my words are good. I tell you a dark cloud hangs over that house, and the storm will soon burst. Centipedes will crawl through the dark rooms and poison lie in every cup. Fevers will burn and chills freeze those who stay beneath that roof. The blood-sucking vampire and the loathsome frog will waltz on the carpets and the fire fiend lap the walls. Beware!"

The Rover spoke with a deep solemnity which made Gilbert shudder. Wild and fanciful as were his prophecies it almost seemed to his listener as though there was some truth in his words. But even then he took them for what they seemed worth, and could not doubt but what he was talking with a madman.

"I hope it is not so bad as that," he gently said.

"It is worse—a thousand times worse. Do not scoff at what Poor Tom says, for he hears much from the foul fiend. When children arise against their parents and plagues shake the earth, men may know that Nature's wrath is aroused. Come to me!"

The Rover took his companion by the arm, and pointed with his staff toward the North.

"Do you see yonder cloud?" he asked.

"No, it is too dark."

"So it is—all is dark! Well, you may not see the cloud now, but it is there. Look for it tomorrow. You may not see it, but it will grow, grow, grow, until all may see who will look. Ay, even though they are blind they will see. I ask you once more, why are you dwelling under yonder roof?"

"I am visiting my friend Giles," explained Roland, uneasily.

"Ha! ha! ha! Your friend! Man, would you dine with the centipede or ride with the foul fiend? I tell you there are no friends in this world. Even fair-faced women are full of deceit and danger. There is one in yonder house. Beware of her, for when you drink she may put poison in your cup."

"You wrong them all, Tom."

"Ha! you doubt me? Well, well, I am not surprised, and doubts are often wisdom. But, one word; come close."

The Rover tightened his hold on Gilbert's arm until his grasp was painful. The latter pitied and was willing to humor him, but he was tiring of the interview, and beginning to think the madman would attack him.

"I tell you Poor Tom sees with a clearer vision than you. Every stick and stone of that house is doomed to destruction, and if you remain you shall go down to the foul fiend with those you serve. Save yourself while you can. Flee for your life; hide yourself in the darkest corner of the earth, and repent. Give alms to those who are worthy, and obey your parents. I have spoken!"

The Rover flung Gilbert's arm aside, bent low upon his staff, and muttered hoarsely:

"Poor Tom's a-cold! Poor Tom's a-cold!"

"Better go and warm yourself then," said Roland, almost angrily.

"I am going, and all night long the foul fiend will pursue me. Over the prairie and through the chaparral—we make a bonny pair. Go you back to your cage and sleep in a fool's paradise, but remember when you sleep the serpent's tooth shall be at your throat and vampires suck your blood. Poor Tom's a-cold!"

The rover suddenly erected his head, glanced toward the house, and then turned on his heel and rushed away over the prairie at full speed.

He left Gilbert confused and uncertain. The man was more of a maniac than a fool, if signs went for anything, but in either case Roland could not help feeling oppressed. The darkness and the solemn, tragic manner of the Rover had their effect, and for a while he almost felt as though there had been truth in his croakings.

A few minutes alone, however, served to banish the impression. Mad Tom was not capable of coherent thought or speech, and his words were to be treated as idle breath. He blamed himself for having tamely heard his insults to the Percivals, and then turned abruptly toward the house.

CHAPTER VII.

GILBERT MAKES A DISCOVERY.

WHEN Roland reached the house, he found Gilbert Percival already there. He had returned from the village, but no mention was made of the tragedy until the young men were alone. Once in the room to which Giles soon invited his guest, he referred to the subject without delay.

"Coroner Moon has been holding an inquest," he said, "and you should have been there. He is a man of the Buck Butler stamp, and his court excelled a variety show."

"No light on the subject, I suppose?"

"None at all. The Mexican came to the village yesterday and put up at the hotel. To-day he went away with his rifle, and from that moment his movements are unknown until he was seen in the wood. He registered at the hotel as Juan Olivera, giving no place of residence, and there was not a paper upon his person. Upon his arm, however, we found a mark which may yet lead to something."

"Not a strawberry-mark, I suppose?"

"No, though it was of strawberry color. It was the figure of a scorpion, pricked into the flesh after the fashion of India ink, but, as I said before, of a red color."

"The figure of a scorpion?" said Gilbert, with a start.

"Yes, you look surprised—do you know of any one thus branded?"

"Not exactly, but the fact recalls something in my own experience which I will now proceed to tell. I have something to show you."

He put his hand in his pocket for the sign of the Silver Scorpion, but fumbled in vain. His face grew blank as the search went on; the talisman was not there.

The discovery caused him wonder, for in that very pocket he had carried it ever since the adventure at Snicker's Camp, but it was not until every pocket had been searched that he settled down to the acknowledgment that it was really gone.

"I'm up a stump," he said, at last. "I have lost what I wished to show you, but that will not prevent me from telling the story."

Thereupon, he told the adventure at Snicker's Camp, of the attempt on his life and the death

of the Mexican, and of the sign of the mysterious order which he had since carried.

"When you spoke of the scorpion figure on the man's arm, it reminded me of the other affair. Both men were Mexicans, but, according to the bill of fare, the second one should have had the talisman about his neck if he belonged to the League of the Silver Scorpions."

"It is not likely he did, for we are far away from where you met your man. But, how do you suppose you lost your trophy?"

"In the chaparral, I suppose—"

Gilbert stopped short and Giles saw his expression change.

"What now?" he asked. "You have an idea. What is it?"

"In order to explain, I must tell something more," answered Gilbert, slowly. "You asked me this morning if I had rested well. I said I had, but I was keeping back something for your private ear. I had an adventure last night."

"Not after you retired?"

"Yes."

"What was it?" Percival asked, in evident surprise.

Gilbert briefly but clearly told of the prowler who had gained entrance to his room and the attendant circumstances, and his host looked amazed.

"Who in the world could it have been?"

"That is the mystery. It was no common robber, for my money and watch were left unmolested. I can only imagine—"

"What?"

"The suspicion suddenly struck me a moment ago, that the Mexican with the scorpion-marked arm might have been of the mysterious League; and that he last night entered my room and recovered the talisman. I really do not see how it could have escaped from my pocket, and it is plain that it must have disappeared between the time I retired last night and the moment when you saw me vainly search for it."

The men looked each other squarely in the face. Giles was evidently deeply interested, and, gradually, an angry look crept over his face.

"By my life, this must be investigated!" he said, in a decisive voice. "We do not allow guests to be thus treated, and if so deadly an organization as the Silver Scorpions seem to be, are working around Danby we want to know it. I trust, Roland, that you do not suspect me of knowing aught concerning this midnight assault."

"My dear fellow, the idea never entered my mind. Of course you had no hand in the affair, and the circumstances show that no one in your house was concerned in it. I locked my door when I retired and found it the same when I recovered from the effects of the blow, and this plainly proves that the unknown entered by way of the window."

"There is a ladder in the outhouse which could have been used for the purpose. There is much that goes to favor your theory. If the unknown had been a common robber, he would have taken your watch and money. Of course he had some purpose in view, and I, too, am inclined to think he came for the talisman and secured it."

"He must have followed me from Snicker's Camp."

"But, why did he not take your life when he had you so completely in his power?"

"That is another link in the chain of mystery. We might also ask what has become of the talisman, if he took it? Why was it not upon his person?"

Giles shook his head slowly. He had no answer for the question.

"Another thing," continued Gilbert. "The man was aiming at something himself when he received the fatal shot. What was his target? You were in a direct line—can it be he intended to shoot you?"

"I don't see why he should. More likely, he was after the jaguar himself."

"I doubt it. It may be he saw the man who shot him, but, in that case, he was a fool to take such long, deliberate aim and allow the other man to drop him. I can't get rid of the idea that he had you covered."

"But, why should he wish to shoot me?"

"Why was my own life attempted at Snicker's Camp? My assailant died with the assertion on his lips that he had attacked the wrong man. Perhaps it was the same to-day."

"I certainly am not the right man. I know nothing of the Scorpion Brothers, and, though I made some enemies while roving through Mexico, I don't believe I ever trod on the toes of any organization."

The conversation was continued for some time longer, but it only served to plunge them deeper into perplexity. One minute they were prepared to believe themselves hemmed in by men of the secret league; the next, they tried to believe that the events of the last twenty-four hours had nothing to do with the band of which the Arizona assassin had been a member.

Gilbert frankly said that he thought it best he should leave the ranch, so that if he was followed by the Scorpions he would not bring trouble upon the Percivals, but Giles declared

that he would not have it so. Whatever the league was, and whatever they intended to do, they must be defied and fought to the end.

He laid plans to better secure his guest's room during the night, and said that in the morning they would lay the case before Buck Butler. He was a fine trailer, and a shrewd, far-seeing man, and if any strangers were hovering about Danby, he would soon discover them and learn their purpose.

"Let us now go to your room and make the window fast," he said, in conclusion.

They arose and left the apartment, and when the door was closed the place seemed unoccupied. It was only in appearance, however, for they were scarcely gone when another person glided from behind the cover of a window-curtain with cautious steps.

The light still burned in the room, and it glimmered over the face and form of Paula, the Mexican servant-girl. She looked anxious and ill at ease, and there was good cause for the feeling. Either through design or accident, she had been a listener to a conversation not meant for her ears, and Giles Percival was not a man to learn such a thing with indifference.

She opened the door, looked cautiously along the hall, and then, finding all clear, passed through and hurried to her own room.

Once there, she threw a dark-colored shawl over her shoulders, left the room again, and passed from the house by a rear door.

Meanwhile, the young men had gone to Gilbert's room and were making a thorough search. The result went to prove that there was no secret entrance, and also, that the talisman was not about the place.

The window was firmly secured and all made ready for retiring, but Giles did not feel at ease.

"Before we separate," he said, "let me go outside and make a circuit of the house. Even now, some one may be lurking in the grove, and, if so, we want to know it."

"What do you think of Mad Tom?"

"A harmless idiot, or madman, who is deserving of pity. It is a terrible thing to be thus afflicted, and every one is kind to him. I have never spoken with him but once, and then he babbled of the 'foul fiend,' of whirlwinds and of floods."

"How long has he been about Danby?"

"I don't know; I never thought to inquire. But, why do you ask? Surely, you don't suspect him of mischief?"

"I hardly know. I met him in the grove to-night and he talked wildly and mysteriously. He said a heavy cloud was hanging over this house, and bade me flee before it burst."

"The talk of a man partly mad, partly foolish. Do not connect him with this affair, for I am sure he is innocent. People speak well of Tom and do him such favors as he will receive."

Gilbert said no more and they went outside. The night was dark, and in the shadow of the grove they could scarcely see each other. A thorough search, however, failed to discover any person, hostile or otherwise. In many cases the boughs of the live-oaks drooped to the ground and made a complete inclosure within, but no prowler was to be found.

Passing around to the front of the house, they were about to enter when they perceived a man and woman a few rods away. They were standing near each other and conversing earnestly, but as the young men looked, they separated, the man went away and the woman came toward the house.

She would have entered by the rear door, but Giles walked toward her and recognized Paula.

"Whom were you talking with, Paula?" he asked.

"To Ralph, Master Giles," she timidly answered.

He knew the man mentioned to be a herdsman of Colonel Mariot, so he said no more and Paula went her way and entered the house.

Her young master and Gilbert were not far behind. They went within and, the rest of the family having already retired, at once sought their rooms.

CHAPTER VIII.

SEARCHING FOR A CLEW.

THE remainder of the night passed peacefully at the Percival house. Roland Gilbert slept on the alert, with his revolver close at hand, but no foe appeared to disturb his slumber. As for dreams, he seldom indulged in such shadowy luxuries, and if he had any they were gone from his mind before morning.

The family met as usual at the breakfast table. Mr. Percival and Nida had not yet heard of the chaparral tragedy, but, knowing the news would soon come to their ears, Giles told the story carelessly, without giving them reason to suspect there was more than one mystery afloat.

Afterward, he ordered two horses saddled, and, accompanied by Gilbert, rode over to Buck Butler's cabin.

When they reached the place they saw Joan standing by the door, but no one else was visible. She stood with her rifle in her hand, and Percival's eyes lighted at the picture she made.

"She is pretty as a wild rose," he said, with a poetic tendency. "I wish all the women of Texas were her equals."

"In that case she would sink into insignificance."

"Perhaps she would, in some eyes, but I am keener sighted than many. I tell you she is a jewel, and warm and true-hearted, if she does have masculine accomplishments. Speak to her, Roland, for you are better acquainted than I."

Joan was looking at them with calm, friendly eyes, and she nodded and smiled as they approached.

"Good-morning, Miss Butler," said Gilbert. "You see we are here for an early call."

"But you don't find us sleeping. Father Butler and Jean are out with their rifles, and I was just on the point of going myself."

"We came to see your father. Which way did he go?"

"I don't know; but he will return shortly. You had better dismount and wait for him."

"I don't see as we can do any better," said Giles. "We are not very skillful on the trail, and a rest will not do our horses any harm."

It was not a very weighty reason for stopping, since the horses had been ridden but two miles; but Gilbert did not oppose the plan, and they dismounted, allowed the animals to wander where they would, and turned to Joan for entertainment.

She was equal to the emergency. She laid aside her own rifle, invited them in, and conversation became brisk. Giles showed an inclination to push his acquaintance, and, as his friend was not a man to stand in the way, he let them bear the burden of the conversation.

Joan was remarkably intelligent for one of her wild life and surroundings, and Gilbert, at least, was surprised to see how well she bore her share of the conversation.

Anon, however, Buck returned, and they settled down to business. The Ranger sniffed in a dissatisfied way when he learned what was wanted.

"I don't see the use o' an investigation, anyway," he said. "Why don't you investigate the death o' ther jaguars? They rank ekul ter a Greaser any day in ther week. Ther long an' short on't is, somebody drapped ther critter, an' he won't cross ther line any more ter steal our cattle. I say it was a good thing."

"You forget that we owe something to humanity, Buck."

"Some debts are better never paid; but I am not ther man ter stand in ther way o' justice. I'll go with you an' lift ther trail."

So the Ranger whistled to his horse, and the three men mounted and rode away toward the South Forest. They had not gone far before they saw Mad Tom striding across the prairie, staff in hand, but he was not near enough for speech, and they thought nothing of it.

At the edge of the forest they met a party from Danby, which included the coroner, Colonel Mariot and others, and all turned toward where the Mexican was shot. They were going through the forms required by law, but it is doubtful if one in the party was anxious to have the mystery solved.

It might bring trouble to some American, and, in their opinion, one man belonging north of the Rio Grande was better than a score south of it; but even Buck entered upon the work with a determination to do his best.

The Ranger first asked to be shown the spot where Colonel Mariot had talked with the Mexican, and then, bidding them stand back, he pursued his work for half an hour. At the end of that time he gave the result of his trailing.

"Arter the man left you, kurnel, he went straight ter ther knoll whar he met his death; an' as his face was not toward Danby, et shows that he made no attempt to foller your directions. He went at a smart pace which was almost a run, an' I am inclined ter think he didn't want Danby at all. He reached ther top o' ther knoll an' scrouched down to shoot at somethin', but ther unknown shooter was ahead o' him."

"I hev found out whar that bullet come from. It was fired from a thicket on ther south slope o' ther knoll, as I know by findin' smut on ther leaves; but, gents, ther ain't no trail thar."

"No trail?" said Mariot, slowly.

"Nary trail."

"Men usually leave trails."

"So they do, but thar ain't one thar. Why not? 'Cause somebody has sence been thar an' rubbed it out. Some critter—I reckon it was done 'arly this mornin'—has obliterated every sign except the smut on ther leaves."

"What do you make of that?"

"Simply that ther shooter don't propose ter be known. He has taken ther bull by ther horns an' left us in ther dark."

The men looked at each other in silence for a while. They knew Buck to be one of the best trailers in Texas, and they never thought of questioning his statements. They saw themselves thrown off the scent, however, and Coroner Moon spoke for all when he blankly asked:

"What can we do now?"

"I can't tell you; but I will sw'ar that no man kin get a clew by trailin'. Ther marks are well rubbed out. As you have before said, ther rifle

that did that deed was o' a different bore from any carried by ther hunters. That clears all o' them, an' you must look elsewhere fer yer shooter. I'd like ter inquire, how ever, what ther Mexican was goin' ter shoot when he was interrupted?"

"The jaguar, I take it," said Mariot.

"I don't believe it. Did you tell him why you was in ther chaparral?"

"No."

"Did you tell him any one else was nigh?"

"No."

Buck stroked his beard reflectively.

"My theory is that he saw the jaguar. Yes, he may have seen him, and also Percival, as he was aiming, and he thought to take a hand in a good cause. I've done the same myself before now."

"It may be, kurnel, but I am more inclined ter think he had a bead either on ther man that shot him or else on Giles Percival."

"Why should he wish to shoot me?" Giles demanded.

"You may have trod on his toes while in Mexico."

"I don't think it. I can't recall any event which would justify the prediction."

Just then one of the party, who had wandered a little apart from the rest, returned and pushed to the front.

"I've found a curious mark on a tree," he said. "I don't suppose it has any reference to this affair, but it has been newly made, and is worth looking at."

They followed him, and then Gilbert, who was with Giles at the rear, suddenly caught his companion's arm. They had reached the marked tree, and they at least agreed with the man that the brand was a peculiar one.

The bark had been scraped from the trunk in a broad circle, leaving a bare, white spot, and in the middle of this was the old, mysterious sign of the Silver Scorpions—the red block, painted or stained on the wood, with a white space in its center which was of the shape of a scorpion.

"The sign, again!" uttered Gilbert, blankly.

"And in a new place," said Giles, slowly.

"The mystery deepens, and this last discovery leads me to think the Mexican was in some way mixed up with the League. Roland, we must go slow in this matter. Pretend to be as ignorant as the rest of them seem to be, and when we are alone with Buck, we will seek his advice."

One by one the men examined the brand. There was nothing mysterious about the manner of its making. The bark had been cut away with a knife and the red stain made by the juice of a berry; but no one except our two friends seemed to have the slightest idea of its significance.

They examined it and conjectured, ending by pronouncing it the work of some man's idle time, and never suspecting that it might have a connection with the tragedy.

The party left the chaparral without having gained any points, and all rode toward Danby except Butler, Roland and Giles. They turned their faces toward their respective homes, and as they went, Roland told the Ranger the whole story of the Silver Scorpions, so far as he knew it, requesting him at the end to unravel the mystery if he could.

Buck stroked his beard and reflected.

"You say, Percival, that you never had any trouble in Mexico, do ye?" he asked, after a while.

"Not that, for I had several little difficulties, but I do not know of any that were not settled, then and there—that is, I don't know of any which should bring the Silver Scorpions to Texas."

"Ef you will tell some o' your adventur's I may get an idee."

Gilbert, looking at his friend, was surprised at the expression on his usually calm face. He seemed confused and uncertain, and back of this was a shadow which was not so easily understood. Whatever the cause, he was for the time disturbed and, it may be, worse than that.

"I'll take a little time to reflect and see you again, to-morrow," he said, speaking awkwardly, after a pause. "I had several adventures while in Mexico—they were too numerous to be related now—but I'll give you the whole lot anon. But, why do you think I am mixed up in the matter?"

"I argue arter this fashion. You made enemies in ther land o' Greasers, and they follered you ter Arizony ter kill. You met Gilbert thar, an' when you two separated, one o' ther gang follered Gilbert by mistake. He never knowed he was wrong until he lay dyin', an then, with his last breath, he exclaimed that he had tackled ther wrong man. Gilbert kept ther talisman, as you call it, but one o' ther Scorpions entered his room an' stole it. He might have killed him thar, an' ther fact that he did not shows that he didn't want his life."

"But Gilbert had killed one of the gang."

"Mebbe ther thief didn't know it. Now, I argue that you was ther man wanted in Arizony, that ther thief was the Greaser who was shot in South Forest, an' that ther critter had you kivered at ther moment he was shot. You,

not your pardner, are ther man ther Scorpions want, an' I take et you had better keep your eyes open."

Gilbert was impressed by the Ranger's logic, but the theory that Giles was menaced by such foes did not weaken his regard.

Mexico was a land of plots and quarrels, of underhand work and secret organizations. He had had trouble when there himself, and it did not lower Giles in his estimation to believe that he was the man against whom the wrath of the Scorpion Brothers was leveled.

The latter, however, had grown suddenly taciturn. He no longer seemed anxious to push matters, to solve the mystery by his own keen observations or the aid of Buck Butler, and neither of his friends could fail to see that he was assailed by some unpleasant memory of the past.

"We will let ther matter rest fur now," said Buck, "but I'd like ter take sides with you ag'in ther Greasers, ef thar is ter be more trouble. I hate 'em, one an' all. You say you don't know anything about the Scorpions?"

"Not a thing," Giles assented.

"Wal, you had better keep your eyes open. Sech critters work in ther dark, slow an' secret. Look out that they don't stab you in ther back."

"But," said Gilbert, "who shot the Mexican, and who marked the sign of the band upon the tree?"

"That's what I want ter diskiver. I'm goin' in ter slow-track ther business, an' ef I don't strike bottom I shall be surprised. I won't be beat by Greasers—least o' all by sech a pack as these."

CHAPTER IX.

SUSPICIOUS CHARACTERS.

THE trio separated in rather an unsatisfactory way. Both Gilbert and the Ranger felt that Giles was concealing something, and the fact made an awkwardness for all; but Buck was willing to bide his time, and he bade them good-day in his usual genial manner.

He rode toward his cabin in deep study.

"What on 'arth is in ther wind? Percival has got somethin' on his mind, sure as shootin', an' I reckon ther idee come ter him sudden like. I'll bet my knife he knows more about ther Silver Scorpions than he wants ter tell. He is quiet an' ca'm in his ways now, but I reckon he has been wild in his day. A man who leaves a good home an' takes ter wanderin' fur five year or so ain't ther kind ter lead a tame life. He has done somethin' in Greaserland that has made him enemies, an' now he has got ter face ther music. If he is wise, he will make a clean breast on't ter me, an' not let hisself be stabbed in ther back an' leave no sign."

Reflecting thus, Buck reached his cabin and was met at the door by his pretty daughters.

"Hallo, cubs," he said lightly, "how's matters 'round hyer? No adventur's o' consequence, I s'pose?"

"Jean has been making a conquest," said her sister, with a mischievous smile.

"Who's ther victim?"

"Mad Tom."

"Don't be foolish, Joan. I met that interesting person on the prairie, and he talked in his usual wild way. That is all there was to it."

"But you were telling me that it was a great pity that he is insane—"

"Didn't I speak the truth? It is a terrible thing for any one to be thus afflicted, and his conversation shows that he was once an intelligent man. People call him Half-witted Tom, but it is plain that his trouble is insanity and not idiocy."

"That's all true, an' I pity ther lad myself," said Buck; "but don't you two cubs git ter quarrelin' over him. I believe ther trouble is that you both want him."

"I think Joan is more interested in Mr. Percival," declared Jean, making an attack in turn.

"She had better not be," said Buck, quickly.

"What is the matter with him?"

"Nothing that I knows on, but he is o' a different kind from us. Don't let your mind run on him."

The Ranger spoke earnestly, for he was beginning to distrust Giles Percival, but Joan retorted gayly, and the subject was dropped.

Buck did not forget the work he had undertaken, and in a quiet way he began to investigate the neighborhood and its people. There were several Mexicans about Danby, and at all of them he looked with a critical eye.

A week passed, however, without an occurrence of importance, but, in many ways, it was a week of progress.

The victim of the wood tragedy had been interred at the expense of some of his fellow-countrymen, and, as no clew had been obtained to the identity of his slayer, people were beginning to talk less of the affair, and Buck, after long tramps in the wood and vicinity, had decided that the matter might as well be allowed to rest.

No further sign had been received from the Silver Scorpions. If they were near Danby, they kept well out of sight, and both Roland and Giles came and went unmolested. The lat-

ter had failed to give Buck any clew. He had told of adventures in Mexico, but none of them appeared to be of a nature likely to call upon his head the wrath of a band like the Scorpions.

Buck hardly knew what to think of the younger Percival. He seemed frank and manly, and his bold nature and strong will pleased the Ranger, but he still suspected that something remained untold.

Roland Gilbert had enjoyed himself thoroughly during the week. He had roamed and hunted with Giles, and there is real enjoyment on the prairie.

One thing, however, was apparent to the keen-sighted man from Arizona. Colonel Mariot bore him no love, and the reason was easily understood. The ex-soldier came often to the Percival house, and when he was there he seemed to prefer Nida's society to that of the men; and Gilbert was not long in seeing that he was laying siege to her heart.

From the first, Gilbert, himself, had admired the daughter of the ranch, but it was not until he perceived that Mariot was jealous of him that he began to look at her seriously. Then he half-unconsciously began to pay her increased attention, and as he went on, Mariot's looks grew darker day by day and some venomous speeches had been exchanged in a secret way.

Giles paid no attention to the evident rivalry, treated both politely and in a friendly manner, and Mr. Percival devoted the greater part of his time to out-door business.

Day by day the dislike of the rivals increased and Roland was beginning to think Mariot less upright and manly than people in general supposed. Somehow, that half-smile did not seem to be that of an honest, straightforward man, and if the colonel had taken his sword and gone to aid in some foreign war, one person at least would have felt no regret.

Gilbert went often to the cabin of Buck Butler, sometimes accompanied by Giles, but oftener alone, when the latter was away on business, and in the society of the Ranger he found a congenial friend. They were different in their looks and ways, but they were growing to think very well of each other.

One evening, Buck found himself at Danby. He had been wandering along the Rio Grande and through the southern side of the forest, nominally on a scout, for he often patrolled the ground when there seemed no actual need of it; and he had brought up at the village to make some trifling purchase.

He had started on his way home when a horseman passed at a trot, going in the direction of the wood which bordered the road from Danby to the suburb in which stood the houses of Mariot, Percival, Buck's own humble home and other dwellings.

The Ranger looked at him as he passed, in the searching fashion with which he had of late looked at everybody, and then sniffed in his old way when dissatisfied.

"A Greaser an' a stranger!" he muttered. "Wonder who he is an' what he is doin' hyar! Ther varmints are gettin' ter be too thick round Danby, an' ef it don't mean mischief, then I am no judge. I can't convince ther other folks or I would run 'em all acrost ther river."

The pounding of horses' feet sounded behind him and he looked around to see two other horsemen. They were moving at a sharp trot, and, passing him as the first had done, went on toward the wood.

Again he frowned, for they, too, were Mexicans, and the supply seemed to exceed the demand.

"What does it mean? Either ther critters are pilin' out o' Danby in a body, or else thar is mischief afoot. I b'lieve it are ther last, fur not a one do I know on 'em. An'—"

He ceased muttering as other sounds arose behind him, and then became thoroughly awake as four other men went past as the leaders had done.

"Seven troopers, all Greasers, all headed one way an' that way due west. Shoot me ef it don't look suspicious. Greasers are always plottin' mischief, an' they'll execute it ef they can. Mebbe these are ther Scorpions, bound fur Percival's, or they may be aimin' fur my own shanty. Ef they go thar, they'll find ther cubs at home. I wish I had a hoss!"

It was a useless wish, but Buck was so much in earnest that he was not to be put down by trifles. He looked after the receding Mexicans and then, with a sudden start, broke into a run and followed after.

"I'll see what they mean or bu'st," was his ultimatum.

CHAPTER X.

BROUGHT TO JUDGMENT.

GILES PERCIVAL was alone in the live oak grove. Night had fallen and the windows of the house showed lighted rooms beyond the curtains, but, though he knew the remainder of the household proper had assembled in the sitting-room, he was quite as well satisfied to remain in the grove and puff his cigar.

People said that he was a man to be envied, and it certainly seemed as though there should be no care on his mind. Fortune was dealing

kindly with him. He was the sole male heir of Morton Percival's accumulated money, and all it could purchase was at his command. He had none of the cares of common people.

Probably he was happy, and he was making the most of his good fortune. He had been wild and reckless in his youth, if the words of his neighbors were to be believed, but he had returned home a strong-faced, strong-willed man, as all found who tried to measure his mind.

Presumably he had met with adventures during his roving life, but he was not a story-teller, and he baffled those who questioned him without seeming to evade their inclinations to learn more of those years of wandering.

As he stood under the live oaks he looked calm and at ease—a man able to care for himself at all times and fully conscious of the facts. Yet even such men sometimes fall into snares set for their feet.

Giles, as he stood there and smoked so composedly, did not suspect that the grove had other occupants besides himself; he did not see the dark forms behind the drooping branches, or the faces which were framed in the natural curtain. He saw nothing, suspected nothing, but all the while he was watched by the prowlers.

While they watched they also whispered together and seemed discussing some plan or trying to form one. That he was concerned in this stealthy conversation looked equally plain, else why did they watch him so narrowly?

One, who appeared to be the leader, was in an impatient, fretful mood. Something was not as he would gladly have had it, and as he scowled from the cover he was evidently trying to see some way of bettering the situation.

Finally he started quickly and turned to one of his men. Whispered words passed between them, intermixed with gestures toward Percival, and then the second man slowly uncoiled a lasso from his belt.

He did not act like one who likes his work, but an impatient sentence from the leader accelerated his movements, and he gathered the lasso in his hand in a scientific way.

Then, without a rustle to betray him, he parted the branches and stepped from cover. He was only a few paces from Giles, and directly behind him, but still the latter smoked on.

The unknown slowly raised one arm and held the lasso as though ready for a cast; then, with a cunning swing, threw it forward toward Giles. It shot out, descended and fell full upon his neck.

Perhaps the heir of the ranch had felt that peculiar touch before and knew its meaning, for as it settled over his head he aroused into sudden life and threw up his hands as though to cast off the noose; but he who had cast it was before him.

One quick, strong jerk he gave at the loose end of the rope, and then Giles was plucked from his feet and dashed on his back with a thud. The fall was a heavy one, more so than a novice might imagine; but, though Giles experienced a sensation as though he had been broken in two, he was not stunned or subdued.

He made a desperate attempt to gain his feet, but, already, half a dozen men had broken from cover, and they flung themselves upon him.

Their weight beat him to the ground, and every arm and leg was seized, but even then he writhed like a panther, and his great strength kept them busy.

Such great odds could not long be resisted, however, and with remarkable quickness a gag was thrust in his mouth, his arms were drawn together and bound behind his back, and he was a helpless prisoner.

The leader uttered a command in Spanish, and then the other men raised their victim bodily and began a rapid retreat from the vicinity.

He who had given them directions paused to look at the house, and his bearded lips curled in a smile, but without a motion in that direction he wheeled and followed his men.

Giles had ceased to struggle. His eyes were unbound, and he could see that the odds were terribly against him. Whoever these men were, they were masters of the situation and he could not but for the time yield to their will, and such being the case, he might as well take it coolly.

He still had a revolver in an inside pocket, and the opportunity might come to use it.

A hundred yards from the grove they came upon a group of men and horses, and it needed no explanation for the prisoner to understand that they had been left there while the remainder of the gang did their work; and this, too, proved that his seizure was the result of a deliberate plan to capture him.

Who were the men and what was their object? In so wild a country as Texas then was, such rough experiences were not strange or unusual, but Giles had a vivid impression that the abductors were no common men. His mind went back to the Silver Scorpions, and he felt an undeniable uneasiness.

The leader uttered a low command, and Giles was placed on a horse's back in a sitting position, after which a lariat was passed from his body around the horse and its saddle and he was firmly held in place.

The abductors sprung into their own saddles; another command was given, and they started off across the prairie at a trot, heading first in the direction of Buck Butler's cabin, but bearing around to the left as soon as Percival's house was safely passed.

Not an unnecessary word passed among the captors; no one addressed Giles; and he, on his part, was kept silent by the gag in his mouth. He could see that his companions had the features of Mexicans, but they wore Texan garments, and did not wear masks or other unnecessary trappings.

As the advance continued, Giles saw they were heading for South Forest, and the fact went to confirm the theory that they were the Silver Scorpions. Ordinary Mexicans would have pushed for the Rio Grande with all speed.

The wood was reached and entered, but still they kept on, the grim leader at the front and Giles in the midst of the other men. If he had been unbound, he would have made a desperate attempt to escape, but his hands were tied behind his back and he could neither resist nor guide his horse.

He must go where they led.

The journey was continued for nearly two miles further, and they were in the heart of the wood. The darkness was intense and they often collided with trees as they went, bushes flapped in their faces and more than once Giles' flesh was torn by the sharp thorns.

He wondered what was to be the result of this strange journey. If the men were of the Scorpion band, it was probable his fate was sealed, but why did they delay the deed so long? The thrust of a knife would end it all, and wherever they left him, the wolves and other beasts of prey would clean his bones.

They paused at last. It was in a little break in the chaparral, where the larger trees gave place to bushes which grew along the sides and from the crevices of rocky ledges. The ground descended sharply to a swampy hollow through which flowed a small tributary of the Rio Grande; and along the bluff the vine-clad rocks assumed the form of high ledges.

The prisoner looked about with interest, observing all that was possible in the darkness. He had never been on the ground before but he wished to remember it in case he ever had a chance to come there again.

Another command from the leader, who still spoke in Spanish, and the gag was removed. Giles had the power of speech once more, but his jaws were stiff and awkward.

The leader looked at him steadily for a moment, while not a sound arose from the band, and then spoke in English, his voice deep and slow.

"Prisoner," he said, "do you know in what company you are?"

"No," was the brief reply.

"Have you not yet recognized me?"

"I don't know you from Socrates," was the cool response.

"I am El Tigre."

"The Tiger? Well, that is a very pretty handle, but it don't enlighten me in the least. Who is El Tigre?"

"Bah! Do not act the fool, Giles Percival. I will compliment you by saying it is not natural to you, and you might as well disown your father as El Tigre."

"It may be undutiful on my part, but I must plead ignorance in the case. I never heard of you before. I reckon there is a mistake somewhere. Introduce me to these other gentlemen and I may remember their names."

"It is unnecessary, but I will add that they are all of the League of the Silver Scorpions!"

"And who are the Silver Scorpions?"

El Tigre made an impatient gesture.

"Do you think this silly talk will help you?" he harshly demanded.

"I see nothing silly about it," said Giles, more earnestly. "I have been set upon and captured by men of whom I know nothing, I have been brought to the loneliest part of South Forest, and your acts go to show that you are no friends of mine. For all I know, you are preparing to take my life. Now, you ask me to remember men I never saw before; you use words of which I know not the meaning, and you say with so much confidence that I ought to know you, that I am obliged to believe you sincere. Tell me who the Silver Scorpions are, and why they have seized me."

"Let this Sign tell you!"

El Tigre thrust his hand inside his coat, withdrew it and held some object aloft. The darkness baffled Percival's gaze to a great degree, but he saw a small white object gleaming on a dark background.

"What is that?" he slowly asked.

"The Sign of the Silver Scorpions!" said El Tigre, in a thrilling voice.

"You plunge me more deeply into mystery and perplexity. I know nothing of the Silver Scorpions."

"Yet, they know you—too well, by far, for your good. They have followed you by night and day since their vendetta began; they have trailed you through two republics. They have found you at last. They have you in their power, and to-night, in this lonely place, the

debt will be paid, and the wrath of the Scorpion Brothers be appeased as they see the life-blood flow from your heart!"

CHAPTER XI.

SENTENCED TO DIE.

THE chief spoke with somber energy and evident earnestness, but Giles did not waver in the least. Whatever he might have done in the past, however much he might have wronged the mysterious League, it was plain that it was not in his brave nature to feel fear.

That same strong will and dauntless courage which Roland Gilbert had observed pictured on his face during the stage ride to Brick Bottom, was standing him in good use in another hour of peril.

"My friend," began he, persuasively; but El Tigre interrupted hotly.

"Do not dare to use the word. I will not bear it."

"Have your own way; but give me a little rope, in turn. I have asked you to explain who and what you are, and why you hate me. Is this more than right?"

"It is every man's right to know of what he is accused; but explanations are foolish in this case. Why should you have more light? You have eaten and slept with me, you have worn the Sign of the Silver Scorpions about your neck. You have been respected, loved, trusted. More than that, you have betrayed your friends, violated your vows, and profaned things sacred. The curse of the Scorpion Brothers is upon you, and your fate is sealed. You have lived like a dog, and like one you shall die!"

Giles made no effort to interrupt this vehement flow of language. In every word the earnestness of El Tigre was expressed, and the arraignment was one which would have appalled a man less brave.

Giles, however, looked him steadily in the face and his own powerful countenance was calm.

"I do not blame you for hating the man who has done all this," he steadily said, "but you are on the wrong track. I am not the man you seek."

"Do you deny that you are Giles Percival?"

"I am Giles Percival, but if you have known any man under that name, he was an impostor. I never ate or slept with you, I never saw you until to-night, and I have no more idea who the Silver Scorpions are than you have of the day when the world will be destroyed."

The speaker showed earnestness equal to El Tigre's, but the chief again made an impatient gesture.

"Why do you trifle with me? I have followed you all the way from the city of Mexico, and during the past week I have looked on your face a score of times when you knew not of it. When the jaguar forgets to love the young she nurses, then may I forget the man who betrayed the Scorpion Brothers."

"If I resemble him, it is a case of resemblance and nothing more."

"Bah! I knew you to be a villain, Giles Percival, but I did not think you a fool and coward."

A hot flush arose to the prisoner's face.

"If you insinuate that I fear you, you are a base liar!" he said, with subdued passion. "More than that, I am willing to have my courage tested. Cast off my bonds and put weapons in my hands, and I will fight you singly or your whole gang at once. Test my courage if you doubt it."

"No," was the cold reply. "I shall not give you a chance to injure the Silver Scorpions further."

"And you refuse to tell me who they are?"

"Since you know them as well as I do, I refuse to waste words on you. You have taken every degree in the order except one. That one is taken only by those who betray their vows and their comrades, and you know the penalty."

He turned away, and spoke to his men. The words were in Spanish, but Giles knew the language almost as well as his own.

"Prepare for the last act," El Tigre had said; and at the order the still figures moved into life.

Giles saw them moving all around him, but in the darkness he could not see what they were doing. He realized, however, that he was in a position of great danger. Bound as he was, any one might have killed him, and looking around he saw a dozen or more hovering about the vicinity. All were his deadly enemies; there could be no doubt about that, and they had the power to execute their will. Honest men seldom came to the heart of the chaparral by night, and he could not hope for rescue.

What passed in the mind of the prisoner no man could tell, but his face showed a courage which was grand. It is far more difficult to face such a peril than one where a man goes in with a dash and vigor, his hands free for fighting, to risk his life in momentary excitement; but Giles Percival was as calm as though surrounded by friends.

Watching his enemies, he suddenly saw a light appear where two or three were huddled in a group, but it was not of the common kind. Blue in color, it flared on the grim Scorpions and played fitfully on the rocks, giving to all a

color which was striking and, in the present case, ominous, speaking as it did of the strange League.

Then Giles was led forward, the light, which proved to be from an ordinary lantern with blue glass, was advanced, and he grew more deeply interested.

Just in front of him was a slab of stone, flat and shaped like a tombstone, but it lay on its side and might have served for a table. Giles, however, saw that a stake arose near each corner and gained an inkling of what was coming.

El Tigre motioned to his men and the prisoner was seated on the rock. This brought him face to face with them all, and, as the light was strong, he looked at each one keenly. If he lived to escape their clutches, he must remember those faces, but the very fact that they made no effort to hide them proved that they did not intend to give him a chance to strike a return blow.

He looked longest at the chief. A man of large and perfect form, he had the features of a Mexican, but his expression was far stronger than that of the ordinary dweller in the old republic. His looks, language and general air proclaimed him one of the upper class, and Giles knew he was one to use his power to the uttermost degree.

"Brothers of the Scorpion League," said El Tigre, turning to his men, "I do not need to tell you in detail why we are here, for you all know it is for the purpose of punishing a traitor. Look at this wretch: His name is Giles Percival and he is a Texan. I have before told you how he wormed his way into the grand order we uphold, and how basely he betrayed our confidence and profaned our sacred rites and places. More than that, you know the result of his baseness. For that treachery we have followed him for scores of miles, and now he is in our power. It is for us to say what shall be done with him. You know the penalty of his crime, and you know the proof against him."

"They know nothing about it," interrupted Giles, as calmly as though his life was not at stake, but without bravado. "I tell you there is a mistake. I know nothing about your band, and if any Giles Percival ever belonged to it, he was an impostor."

"We will now take a formal vote to learn the minds of the Brothers as to whether he is deserving of death. Answer to your names as I call them, and let the response be either 'guilty' or 'innocent. Caspo del Rio!'"

"Guilty!" was the firm reply, from one.

"Ricardo Alva!"

"Guilty!"

"Pietro Ribero!"

"Guilty!"

And so the word ran along the line until each and every one of the Scorpion Brothers had spoken. Not one had raised his voice for the prisoner, though it may be some of them admired the lofty courage with which he faced them. The blue light fell squarely on his strong face and its composure was wonderful.

"You have voted well, Brothers," said El Tigre, at the end, "and it only remains to carry out the righteous vengeance of the League. We are about to take the life of this man, not in hot anger or in a spirit of low revenge, but to take pay for our wrongs and sweep a vile reptile from the earth. Am I not right?"

"You are right," they answered.

"Then, Giles Percival, hear your doom. We give to you the death all traitors to the League must meet, and if it seem severe, you have only yourself to thank. Death by fire is the fate you have invited."

He made a motion to his men and they seized the prisoner and laid him flat upon the rock. Then his feet were separated and pulled toward opposite corners, cords passed around his ankles and carried down to the bottom of the stakes and made fast, his hands liberated and served in like manner at the head of the slab and he lay in spread-eagle fashion, helpless as when born, a little nearer to his doom but still calm.

He wondered what they would do next, but, of the two, would have preferred to be excused from seeing.

"It strikes me this has gone far enough," he said, looking at El Tigre. "I tell you there is a mistake and I can prove it. Take me to Mexico and I will convince you that I am not the man you want."

"A trick to gain time," said the chief, coldly. "I take back what I said a while ago and acknowledge that you are no coward, but you can not coax the Silver Scorpions to forget their duty. Here, and to night, the account will be squared and your perjured soul be sent to its Maker."

"I am not so sure of that," was the calm assertion.

"What can save you?"

"I shall save myself. So far you have not used me very rigorously, but if you press down on the screws you will see me slide from out your clutches."

"We shall see," answered El Tigre, with a sneering smile. "Scorpions, proceed with your work."

The men moved in unison. Each one seized

an armful of dry sticks from a pile near at hand and advanced to the slab. Then the sticks were laid about and over the prisoner in such a way that they soon concealed his body from view without pressing upon it. All were piled upon the slab that would hold together, and then additional stacks were built upward from the ground on both sides, connecting with the first and forming a great heap from which Percival's head and arms projected at one end and his feet at the other.

He watched them calmly, but did not speak until they paused. Then he looked at El Tigre. "Are you going to burn me?" he quietly asked.

"Yes," said the chief, really amazed at such composure.

"You forget that when the fire is started it will burn away the cords that bind me to the stakes."

"I forget nothing," was the cold reply.

Evidently, he spoke the truth, for his men next brought forward blankets saturated with water and laid them over the head, arms and feet of the prisoner. As these various members projected from the pile, it was plain to see that by the help of the wet blankets, the fire would be confined to his body for a considerable time.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SCORPIONS' REVENGE.

EL TIGRE advanced and lifted one corner of the blanket from the prisoner's face.

"Do you still have hope?" he asked.

"There is hope even beyond the grave. If I die here you will see Giles Percival again. When you think yourself the safest I will arise to confound and thwart your plans and your ambitions. The League of the Silver Scorpions shall find me a panther on their track."

El Tigre did not answer. Brave himself, he admired courage in others, and the remarkable coolness of the man he had doomed to death touched even his heart of hatred.

"Why do you wait?" Giles demanded.

"Are you in haste?"

"I see no reason for delaying the final scene. Touch off the fire and let it burn."

"Base as you are, I do not like to do it. I have seen your courage tried in the past, but I never dreamed it was like this. Had you remained true you would have been honored as no Texan was ever honored before."

"That sounds very pretty, but this is no time for sentimentality. Drop all that and set the fire a-burning."

El Tigre gazed on the calm, handsome face for a moment in silence, his own features irresolute, then, with what seemed like a sigh, he turned to his men.

"Fire the brush!" he deeply said.

Flame was caught from the lantern and communicated to the pile. The dead branches caught quickly, beginning at the bottom, and they began to crackle and send up a thick smoke.

Satisfied that no more was needed, the Scorpions fell back several paces and stood watching the strange scene. El Tigre stood with folded arms, his face strong and stern. As deeply as he hated Giles Percival, his heart was sore to see so brave a man die like a dog.

Smoke rolled up in dense masses and hid the pile from view. The fire was burning briskly, but as yet it was not eating away the branches in the immediate vicinity of the doomed man. So far his iron will had kept him silent, but how would it be when the flame touched his own person? Would he not then shriek for mercy?

El Tigre moved to the right, to be near the head of his victim. He could dimly see the blanket through the thinner circles of smoke, but no motion was visible. Perhaps Giles had been smothered by the wet cloth, or had fainted from some cause. The chief was tempted to move forward and discover before it was too late. He even made one step toward the spot, but paused and again folded his arms.

The moments wore on. The flame thrust its red tongue further and further, and the whole pile of brush was one fiery, blazing mass. The middle of the slab was like a furnace, and the half-eaten branches which toppled over and fell on the wet blanket hissed and sputtered.

Still no sound from within the circle of smoke and flame!

The minor Scorpions looked at El Tigre in amazement. What manner of a man was dying before them that he could stand the embrace of the fire-fiend and utter no cry?

The chief was less perplexed. He believed Giles had fainted, and he was almost glad to know so brave a man was not suffering the torture to which he had been doomed.

Driven back by the heat, the Scorpions stood in a group and watched until, with a sudden crackle, the whole mass came down in a heap, the greater part falling off the slab, but enough still remaining to make a brisk flame.

El Tigre looked earnestly at what remained. The amount seemed scarcely as large as he had expected, and then, for the first time, he became conscious that no odor except that of burning wood was perceptible.

Catching up a long stick he strode forward and thrust it into the flame. It met no resist-

ance—touched nothing more than the coals and half-consumed fagots. A change passed over his face, and with one sweep he cleared the slab.

There was no sign of a human body; the Scorpions' victim, dead or alive, had disappeared!

El Tigre stared blankly at the slab, and his followers, coming to his side, looked in the same fashion.

On each face was a look of amazement. They knew no human being could be so quickly consumed; in fact, their material had not been sufficient to reduce the prisoner to ashes in any case, but nobody was on the rock.

Consternation and awe fell upon the majority of the men. They remembered that Giles Percival had declared that he would not perish at their hands, that he would slip through their fingers; and at this unmistakable proof that he had done so, all that was superstitious in their natures came to the front, and they believed he had escaped through means more than human.

El Tigre was less superstitious, and, though amazed at finding his victim missing, he soon aroused. He sprung forward, regardless of the heat, and made a hasty examination. At each corner, the thongs which had held Giles to the stakes had been cut, and he began to see clearly.

"Scorpions!" he cried, "the prisoner has escaped our vengeance. He has not gone by unearthly means, but some one has worked under cover of the smoke and taken him away. See! The cords have been cut by a knife, and, while we have dallied, Giles Percival has been stealing away. Still, it may not be too late to recapture him. Scatter and make a thorough search!"

"Ha! ha! ha!"

It was a wild and mocking laugh which rung out like a supplement to his last words. The Scorpions started and looked about, grasping their weapons as though expecting to see an enemy.

"They are still here," said the chief, quickly. "From whence came that laugh?"

"Ha! ha! ha!"

Again the sound rung out, as mocking as before, and this time tinged with triumph, but even the astute leader could not locate it. It seemed to proceed from their very midst, but not one of the band had even smiled.

"It is an evil spirit!" said Ricardo Alva, with a shudder, and the bronzed faces of the Scorpions looked white in the glow of the fire.

"Show yourself, if you dare!" said El Tigre, angrily, as he drew a revolver. "Prove that you have cause to laugh or remain silent."

"All honest men laugh when the Silver Scorpions are baffled," retorted a deep voice, but it was as mysterious as the laugh.

El Tigre looked about in confusion. The speaker seemed beside him, but there was no nook in which a man could hide and cover only existed by the rocks beyond the fire or in the bushes of the chaparral.

"Coward!" he cried, hotly. "Are you a wolf to skulk in the gloom? Come out, if you dare!"

"Those who work in secrecy must be content with secrecy. Who ever knew the Silver Scorpions to be open and manly! If the League want me, let them come and take me."

The chief had done his best to locate the voice, but he was still baffled. He had looked sharply at his own followers, but not one had moved his lips. They looked alarmed and confused, and he could hardly crush back his impotent fury.

"Who speaks?" he demanded.

"The spirit of Giles Percival."

"Fool! We are not children. Are you our enemy? If so, show yourself and fight like a man."

"Speak for yourself, El Tigre, but do not abuse those who meet you with your own weapons. Spirits do not appear to men, but you shall yet have proof that I am your enemy. Be content, for now to know that from tonight it is to be blow for blow. Search for me if you would find me!"

With the last words the voice seemed to recede toward the chaparral at the north and El Tigre dashed in that direction, his revolver ready for use. A mocking laugh led him on, but it was not until he dashed against the thorny bushes that he realized that he was on a useless chase.

He went back to the fire and wiped the blood away from his scratches. The thorns had left marks he would carry for a week, but it was not that which made his face so gloomy.

"We are foiled," he said, addressing his men.

"I know not the way in which our prisoner escaped, or with whom I have been talking, but one thing is certain—Giles Percival has escaped and we must lie low and await our next chance. The day will come, for the Silver Scorpions never sleep."

He paused as a sharp, ringing sound arose from the chaparral at the north. It was the unmistakable crack of a rifle, and he could not but believe it had some connection with his own affairs. There were others of the League near Danby who might be in the wood, and they might have chanced upon the escaped prisoner.

He uttered a terse command, and then sprang

away, over the rocks and into the bushes, his men following at his heels.

They had not gone far when two or three other reports sounded, this time in a different key, and he believed he recognized the *escopetas* carried by the Silver Scorpions.

At any rate, there was fighting not far away, and with an utter disregard of cactus and mesquite the band hastened toward the scene of strife.

CHAPTER XIII.

FIGHTING AGAINST ODDS.

WHEN Buck Butler set out to follow the mysterious horsemen along the Danby road, he did so with a full realization of the fact that he was buckling on an armor several sizes too large for him, as it were—they were well mounted, while he was on foot.

The fact, however, did not worry him greatly. He was a good runner for his years and size, and he settled down to the work with a business-like air.

The small wood that fringed the road was soon reached and passed, the strangers going at a trot and Buck at his steady run. He kept cool, but every moment saw his uneasiness increase. They were going toward Percival's, and cutting down the intervening space little by little, and he was strong in the belief that they meant mischief to some one.

His first theory was staggered, however, when on passing the wood, they turned sharply to the left and set off across the field in the direction of South Forest.

The Ranger hesitated for a moment, for there was no human habitation in their present track until the Rio Grande was passed, but he had settled down to the belief that they intended some kind of mischief, and he resolved to follow further.

They led him across the prairie to the chaparral, across the very ground where the jaguar hunt had occurred, and on through the tangled bushes ahead.

As they went, a bright glow was arising against the southern sky in advance, but the trees grew so thickly that Buck saw nothing of the Scorpions' bonfire.

They were going on in the old way when he saw a sudden commotion among the Mexicans, and then a sharp crack rung out on the air, the unmistakable note of a rifle.

Buck paused abruptly and cocked his own weapon, and he had hardly done so when a single man shot into view among the bushes, coming from the very midst of the horsemen.

The Ranger dropped on one knee and looked at him keenly. He was on foot and seemed in great haste, but the darkness prevented any further discovery.

Just then several other reports followed in a key well known to Buck, while by the aid of the flashes he was able to discover that they came from *escopetas* carried by the Mexicans. One lump of lead whistled close to his head, after harmlessly passing the fugitive, and then he sprung to his feet with a surprised exclamation.

He had recognized the running man.

"This way, Giles Percival, this way!" he added, heartily.

The fugitive wavered, hesitated, and the Ranger saw his hand drop to his belt and arise again.

"Hold hard!" he continued, quickly. "I'm Buck Butler; don't fire!"

"Then you had better get out of this," returned the man addressed, coolly, but with equal quickness. "The devil and all his crew is after me."

A heavy crashing in the bushes showed that the Mexicans were indeed in pursuit, but Buck caught the arm of his companion.

"Foller me, boyee; foller me, an' I will beat 'em all in a way they will hate. Be they Greasers?"

"Every one," said Giles tersely.

"Then I'll take pride in lickin' 'em. Foller me."

Before the last word was spoken the two men were in rapid retreat, while in the rear crashed the pursuers. Buck had no fears for the result. He knew the chaparral well, and it was just the place for the tricks of his trade. For his own part he would have laughed at the Mexicans in a straight race, but he had no intention of being chased until he was out of breath.

He ran forward for a hundred yards with Giles at his heels, and then doubled around a thicket, cautioned his companion against making any audible noise, darted in and among the bushes for a moment, and then had the satisfaction of hearing the pursuers go crashing away on a false scent.

His stratagem would have worked to a charm had it not been for one thing. By doubling on his track, he had evaded the men he had himself followed to the chaparral, but that very trick brought him in the path of El Tigre and his men, who, as we have previously seen, were hastening forward to learn the cause of the firing.

Giles, on his part, had failed to remember that they were moving directly toward where he had so narrowly escaped death, and his surprise

was equal to Buck's, when they ran squarely into the faces of the Scorpions.

In this collision, El Tigre had the advantage; he was looking for the man who had slipped through his fingers, and he did not fail to recognize him, even in the darkness.

"It is Percival!" he shouted to his men. "Seize him alive if you can!"

He sprung forward as he spoke, but Giles threw up his revolver and fired. Luck favored the Scorpion, however, and a red mark along his neck was the only sign he could afterward show.

Buck Butler did not know who the new-comers were, but his fighting blood was boiling. He fired his rifle almost in the face of one man, and then, as Giles beat down another by a sweeping blow, he clubbed his own rifle and stood firmly by his side.

"Draw off, ye infarnal Greasers, draw off!" he shouted, but in an instant more both men were busy.

The Scorpions rushed in hotly to obey El Tigre's order, and common men would have gone down before so fierce an assault. Buck and Giles, however, met them bravely, and other men went down before their heavy blows.

"They are all Mexicans," hissed Giles, who knew well how to touch the Ranger's feelings.

"Then smash 'em all ter pieces!" thundered the Texan, using his clubbed rifle like a demon.

It was a gallant guard they interposed, but the Scorpions were mad with rage and, perhaps, something more. Only those who fell, halted; the others pressed on, and their force of numbers enabled them to close and baffle the defense of the Texans.

Percival's rifle was knocked from his grasp, but in a moment more his revolver began to speak, and a man fell at every flash. Buck had become silent, but his opponents were painfully aware that he was using a bowie with deadly effect.

He managed to reach the side of Giles.

"We've got ter run," he said. "Set your face west an' make a dash with me."

Giles had no idea of the points of the compass, but he kept close to the Ranger, and they moved together. Putting forth all of their power, they hurled themselves on the Mexicans with resistless fury. Men fell or were knocked aside before their heavy blows, and they found a road through the band.

One moment the result seemed in doubt, for El Tigre, who had arisen after being stricken down, was commanding a pursuit; and then the bushes opened and closed before their rapid rush.

"Keep close ter me an' run hard!" directed Buck, as he flung back the thorny brush.

Giles did not answer, but he was ready enough for retreat. Brave as he was, he did not covet the society of the Silver Scorpions, and he would gladly have bid them an eternal adieu then and there.

A hot pursuit began, but they might as well have chased a will-o'-the-wisp as Buck Butler. He darted straight ahead for a few rods, then curved erratically, doubled, and soon had the Scorpions completely at fault. They ran about blindly and cursed in Spanish, while Buck and Giles crouched in a thicket and laughed at their rage.

"Oh! don't I wish I had ther Rangers hyer!" said the former, plaintively. "We would jest make them Greasers howl. I tell ye, boyee, thar will be a cl'arin' out 'round Danby to-morrow. Every durned Greaser shall leg it across ther Rio Grande, or I'm a liar."

The angry voice of El Tigre still arose, urging on his men, but they were thoroughly at fault. Buck arose, spoke to Giles, and they left the thicket and glided away. Once more the Ranger proved his forest lore, and as they stole from the dangerous locality Giles marveled at his skill.

Not a word was spoken until all sounds of their enemies had died away.

"Be yer ready ter go home?" Buck then asked.

"More than ready—I am anxious," was the reply.

Another long silence followed, and they went through the tanglewood until it ceased, and they stood on the ground of Morton Percival's ranch.

Then Buck once more turned.

"Ef it are a fair question, I'd like ter know how you come ter be in sech a durned pickle," he then said.

"All because of the Silver Scorpions. They are no longer a shadowy terror; they have appeared in the flesh and it was against them we fought to-night."

"They captured you, I take it."

"Yes."

"How?"

Giles began at the beginning and plainly related all that had occurred from the time he was kidnapped in the pine-oak grove until the time he lay on the sacrificial stone.

"Matters looked squally for me then," he continued, "but the tide turned in an unexpected and mysterious manner. As I lay on the slab the Scorpions turned away for consultation and I tried to nerve myself to meet my fate like a

man. Just then, however, I felt a touch on my arm, and, turning my head, saw the dim form of another head near my shoulder.

"Be brave," whispered a noise in my ear. "Follow my directions and you shall be saved. Let these fellows go on with their work and, at the last moment, I will save you. Not a tongue of fire shall touch your flesh. Will you trust me?"

"I whispered that I would, but, at that moment, the Scorpions turned back and my unknown friend sunk from sight. I had before observed that the slab lay on other stones, and I realized that he was hiding in the space beneath."

"It was a perilous moment for him as well as for myself. It seemed impossible that the Scorpions should miss discovering him, and I grew nervous under my mask of calmness. Nothing of the kind occurred, however. El Tigre spoke further to me, and then the fagots were piled about my person."

"In doing this, they used peculiar exactness. The branches were piled up in such a way that not one touched my body. I had a clear space underneath, and preparations were soon made to protect my face and limbs. It seems it was not their intention to reduce me to ashes, but simply to burn my body until I was dead—a very elaborate, but, in that case, unavailing scheme."

"When the wood was piled up, the stuff was fired at the bottom and it began to crackle, while the smoke rolled thickly around my head, penetrating even under the blanket which covered my face."

"I began to feel weak-knee'd and inclined to howl for mercy; but at that critical moment the pressure on my feet suddenly gave way and I realized that the thongs had been cut. I experienced a revulsion of feeling and could hardly keep my place, but a moment later my hands were freed and the blanket lifted from my face."

"Not a word; let me do all," said a subdued voice, and I saw a man through the thick smoke which almost stifled me.

"Then I was seized by the shoulders and drawn from my prison, the work scarcely jarring their elaborate structure of wood. It was another critical moment, for I expected the Scorpions to rush upon us, but I see now that the smoke covered our movements; indeed, it was so thick I could scarcely see my rescuer."

"He thrust a full set of weapons into my hand, pushed me toward the northern chaparral and bade me flee for my life. I think that I made no answer, and I know that I dashed quickly toward the cover. Once there, I turned about to look for my late companion, but he was not visible. I hesitated a moment, fearing he might have met with trouble, but all was quiet behind me and I resolved to heed his last words and take to rapid flight."

"I went, and all was going well when I ran into that gang with which you first saw me. They tried to stop me, but I gave them the contents of my rifle and dashed through. What followed, you already know."

"An' that is all?" said Buck, slowly.

"Yes."

"You don't know, even now, who ther Scorpions be?"

"I do not. You know them as well as I."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PROWLER.

"THEY seem ter know you wal," said Buck, slowly.

"It is all a mistake on their part, just as I told them. Some one who resembles me has done them an injury, and they are hot for my blood. It seems too that this unknown man used my identity, for they say it was Giles Percival who betrayed them."

"Thar is a mystery somewhar."

"You doubt me, Buck; you believe I am the man who wronged them," said Giles, gravely.

"I don't say it, but ther case looks queer. Lord! I don't make any sech charges, boyee—not in the least."

"Yet you can't get rid of the idea that I am the man. You remember that they hate Giles Percival, or are assuming to own that name, and that they followed me from Mexico and are now willing to swear that I am the man they seek. I don't blame you, for the evidence looks strong, but I never saw these men or heard of the Scorpion Brothers until I came to Texas."

He spoke earnestly and faced the Ranger boldly; but if the latter had been called upon to give a decision, knowing that the words would be his last on earth, he would have declared that he believed Giles to be concealing something—in plain words, to be uttering a falsehood.

"Et's a tangled-up mess," he said, "an' we may es wal drop it fur now; but I'll help ye ter straighten it if I kin. I'll help ye first, last an' always, for it are ag'in' ther Greasers. To-morrow, at an 'arly hour, I shall lead ther Rangers inter ther chaparral. Ev'ry Greaser has got ter cl'ar out o' this region on ther jump. Will you ride with us?"

"Yes," said Giles, quickly. "I will be there, and so, I think, will Roland Gilbert."

"Bring him if he wants ter come. Thar is good stuff in ther boyee."

Some further words were spoken, a place and time of meeting was named for the following day, and then they said good-night and went toward their respective homes.

Giles Percival's mind was busy, but he thought coolly and systematically. His adventure had not confused his strong will or mind, and as he strode along he reflected on each point of the strange drama of the night.

"Buck doubts me," he finally muttered, aloud, "and well he may. If he knew all he would spurn me as though I was a serpent—and I'm not sure but what I am. Be that as it may, I feel that I have not seen the last of the Silver Scorpions. They are hot on the trail, and only my life-blood can calm their wrath. My sin is taking me into strange perils and adventures, and I am tempted to flee from this place and from the Silver Scorpions. But no, no! I will not. I have been called bold and brave in the past, and I will remain and defy the Scorpions. It shall be a battle of wits, and they will not find me a child. Perhaps they will win the game and kill me—but that will be no more than I deserve. 'The wages of sin is death!'"

He ceased to mutter, and strode on with his teeth set and his strong face sterner than ever before.

When Giles reached his home, he found Rowland still awaiting him in the sitting-room, but, the hour being past midnight, the remainder of the household had retired.

A look of pleasure crossed Gilbert's face as he saw his friend, but it speedily gave place to one of amazement which was not unmixed with alarm. The thorns of the chaparral had made a wreck of Percival's clothing, and over his face and hands was the blood of the Mexicans against whom he had fought.

"In heaven's name, what is the matter?" Roland demanded.

"Buck and I have been jaguar hunting," was the careless reply. "All quiet here?"

"Yes, but we have been wondering at your prolonged absence, and your father and sister have been anxious."

"There was no cause for it. I went off on a sudden trail, as I may say. Come to my room and we will have a smoke before we turn in."

Giles yawned and seemed wholly at ease. Roland, who did not suspect anything, arose and followed him, and they went at once to the upper floor.

The room of the heir opened from another chamber, which was usually unoccupied, and as they passed through the latter apartment, he locked the door behind him. Why he did so he scarcely knew, but he little suspected that in turning the key he had prevented a third person from overhearing what he had to say.

To that point they had been followed by a figure which glided noiselessly in the rear, but the locking of the door baffled the plans of a slightly formed girl, who stopped and stared blankly at the solid wood which confronted her and uttered a little hiss.

"*Carajo!*" she breathed, spitefully, "why does he lock the door? Where has he been and how has he escaped El Tigre? I wish I knew, but I might as well abandon the attempt at once and go to my own room. Ah! these Texan fools are so cautious!"

And the she turned and glided away with a cat-like step which seemed natural to her. Whatever her purpose had been, Paula (for the would-be spy was the female servant) was foiled for once.

Meanwhile, the young men had reached the inner room. Giles placed a chair for his guest, washed away all the blood-stains, calmly lighted a cigar, and then sat down as composedly as though the world was full of sunshine and happiness.

Beginning with his adventure in the live-oak grove, he told all that had occurred during the night, going so far into details, as to repeat all of his conversation with El Tigre that he could remember, but making the story a very modest one throughout.

Gilbert did not listen with equal calmness. He felt the full import of what had occurred, and made frequent interruptions, and his face was full of gloom as he heard the end.

El Tigre and the Scorpion Brothers still lived, and he had a presentiment that Buck Butler would not succeed in destroying them.

"What in the world does it all mean?" he demanded.

"Well, it is pretty clear that I am the man the Scorpions want, and the fact that they are on the wrong track does not amount to much. They believe they are right, and if they don't send me across the divide it won't be their fault."

Giles blew a wreath of smoke into the air and looked meditatively at the curling rings.

"It is terrible," said Roland.

His companion laughed lightly.

"Lord love you, don't look so blue," he said, cheerfully. "It's just as I told El Tigre; he and his gang can't hold me, and the events of the night have proved it."

"He will make sure of you the next time."

"But I don't intend to be caught again. He

has shown me that my life is hunted, and from this time out I shall be on my guard."

"Don't be too confident, Giles. I feel that these men are as powerful as they have shown themselves deadly."

"I've seen a bit of wild life in my day, myself, and I am now going to put my wits against theirs. We will see who wins. I don't fancy foes who work in the dark, but we must all fight fire with fire. If the Silver Scorpions want war, war it shall be, to the knife."

Gilbert felt a thrill of admiration for the man before him. The careless look had vanished and his face was stern and resolute. He certainly had the nerve to make a hard fight, but with an unknown number of assassins on his track, it looked as though the chances were terribly against him.

Time passed unheeded by the two men. They talked long and earnestly, and when they retired it was to dream wildly.

CHAPTER XV.

COLONEL MARIOT'S FRIEND.

On the following day, Buck Butler carried out the crusade he had projected against all Mexicans in general and the Silver Scorpions in particular. Except for the easy-going judge at Danby, Buck was the only recognized officer of the law about the place, and he had a way of carrying out his plans which was irresistible.

On this occasion he swept every Mexican he could find across the Rio Grande in hot haste. He injured none of them, but they had to go whether they were willing or not; and when the work was done he complacently remarked to Giles Percival that he believed "the scoop had absorbed all the Scorpions; at any rate, the air seemed a powerful sight purer."

Giles answered him absently, but he scarcely shared his confidence. Somehow, he felt that the avengers had only begun their vendetta; that they were no more than singled; and it might be none of them had been found.

The locality where he had so nearly been forced into the role of a burnt-offering had been visited, but only a few ashes and half consumed fagots had been found.

Even Buck, keen trailer that he was, could find no footprints.

Still, the Ranger's theory received confirmation in the days which followed, for a week passed away without a sight of the El Tigre party. Giles Percival came and went unmolested, and, though Buck Butler was always on the watch, he failed to see anything suspicious.

Roland Gilbert had become lulled into a sort of tranquillity, which arose principally from Buck's assertion that the Scorpions had been rooted out. So Gilbert breathed freer, and began to enjoy himself a good deal.

He hunted and rode with Giles and Buck, and in the intervals found time to become better acquainted with Nida. When young people take a mutual liking to each other at first sight, difficult barriers are seldom erected by either to prevent a better acquaintance; and Roland and Nida were often in each other's company, to their mutual pleasure.

Across this peaceful panorama oneman stalked like a ghost at the banquet. Colonel Mariot was pressing his intimacy with the Percival family. He came uninvited and made himself at home, and Roland was often obliged to smother his wrath when the ex-military man intruded on his private chats with Nida.

Still, the colonel was always bland in his way. He would apologize for his intrusions, at the same time wearing the half smile no one had ever succeeded in interpreting; but on such occasions he had not the politeness to take himself out of the way.

One day he sought the elder Percival with a request on his tongue. A friend of his—a lady—was about to arrive in Texas. Some relative of hers had been his schoolmate in France, and he had known Violette Aubry—such was her name—when she was a child.

Now, her male protectors by birth were all deceased, she had been bequeathed to him, and a few days would bring her to Danby.

"But what am I to do?" asked the colonel, knitting his brows. "She is young, innocent, and pretty. It would never do to have her at my bachelor quarters. My dear Percival, I am up a stump unless you help me out. Mademoiselle Aubry must be cared for by somebody—dare I ask you to shelter her until other plans are laid?"

The colonel's face bore a close resemblance to a smile at that moment. His eyes twinkled and his lips parted, and along his cheeks ran a perceptible wrinkle, which was like the shadow of a smile.

His voice, too, was soft and persuasive.

Of course Mr. Percival readily consented. He was well-to-do and kind-hearted. In any case he would be glad to help this timid orphan, while as matters were she would be a delightful companion for Nida. She spoke English almost perfectly, Colonel Mariot said, and on the whole it seemed as though she was doing the Percival family a favor by entering their family circle.

She came, she saw, she—well, it remained to be seen to what extent she would conquer.

Mr. Percival liked her from the first. He was of a nature easily impressed by fair words and pleasant ways, and when Violette spoke of being alone in the world and expressed a strong desire for love and sympathy, his heart went out to her and the young stranger was cordially welcomed.

She was a tall, slight girl, dark and pretty, with eyes, cheeks and mouth to tempt a man of austere nature; she was at all times graceful and ladylike, and her English was so slightly tinged with an accent as to make it as attractive as was mademoiselle herself.

She settled easily into their daily life, and made herself seem like an old acquaintance in a short time. Every one, even to the servants, was made to know that she was there; and when she expressed a strong fancy for Paula, the Mexican girl, Mr. Percival deemed it the proper thing to appoint that young woman to mademoiselle's own service.

Another week passed. Buck Butler patrolled the Rio Grande and chuckled at the absence of all Mexicans; Giles and Roland hunted and rode unmolested by the Silver Scorpions; Mad Tom wandered and muttered as before; Violette smiled and talked prettily, often receiving Colonel Mariot; and Nida and the Butler sisters went quietly along their usual ways.

One afternoon, Violette, Nida and Giles went by special invitation to visit the colonel at his home. He had given them but a few minutes for preparation, having dropped in upon them just as Roland Gilbert took his rifle and wandered toward Buck Butler's cabin.

Once at the Mariot house, there was some preliminary amusement, and then the colonel proposed a stroll in the adjacent wood. They went, and as their host managed to carry Nida off in a graceful fashion, Mademoiselle Aubry was left alone with Giles.

Between the two there had never been a perceptible bond of sympathy. She had smiled upon him as on every one else, but her charming ways had never awakened a response with him. He was polite, but never demonstrative; and she had once said to Nida, with a pout, that her brother was older than her father.

Giles was uncommonly grave for one of his years, but no one could call him stern in his manner.

Left alone with him, Violette talked rapidly and merrily. She commented on Texas and on France, and laughed as happily as though Giles had been more encouragingly warm.

Anon, she, too, grew grave and thoughtful.

"Pardon me," she said, after a pause, "but may I ask you something of your friend, Mr. Gilbert? I know little of him except as I see him day by day, and he is not communicative, while I—I—"

Her manner, more than her words, caused him to raise his eyes and look at her keenly.

"What do you wish to know?" he asked slowly.

"Something of his past—of his social position, and—and all about him."

A faint smile hovered for a moment around her companion's lips.

"He is a dead shot, a fine horseman, well educated and intelligent. Further than that, I know nothing, but I dare say he will enlighten you."

"He is very reserved," said Violette.

"Did you wish particularly to know of his past?" Giles inquired, watching her closely.

Mademoiselle looked steadfastly at the leaf she was tearing with her jeweled hands.

"Well, monsieur," she said, slowly, "you have, of course, observed that he is often in my company. I do not think I could avoid him if I would. Such being the case, it is natural that I should wish to know who and what he is."

Giles stroked his mustache reflectively, but maintained an unmoved face. He understood her at last, but could not see that he was called upon for action. He had never observed that Gilbert was particularly devoted to the young lady, and if he was, what of it?

Both parties, according to Percival's idea, had seen enough years of life to act for themselves, and he was not inclined to play the guardian.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE COLONEL AS A HERO.

MADemoiselle AUBRY watched her companion closely for awhile in silence, but he did not seem inclined to speak. Such being the case, she again returned to the subject.

"What am I to do, monsieur?"

"Well, I am not sure that I get the drift of your remarks, but if I do it seems to be a plain case. Do you mean to hint that Gilbert's conduct has a matrimonial coloring on the surface?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Then I advise you to wait until he comes down to words, and then answer him as you see fit. It is a very easy matter to dispose of, I reckon, though I never had a proposal myself."

"But I know nothing of Monsieur Gilbert's character."

"In my opinion formalities don't count for much in Texas. If I was to hire a herdsman, I should look at his face rather than at any written recommendation he might carry. Business and love are a little different in their na-

tures, I dare say, but you can hardly expect Gilbert to hand you a recommendation from his former lady-love."

"Monsieur, you are laughing at me!" exclaimed Violette, with a pout.

"Not at all," declared Giles, in the same cool, business-like way. "I am giving the case a careful consideration, and if I show any inaccuracy it is because I am not experienced in such matters. Let me say, however, that Texas is not France. We are trying hard to get on a civilized plane, but form and ceremony are not yet on the books. If you marry in Texas, mademoiselle, don't expect a man to write a history of his life. We all have matters to conceal."

Violette did not look satisfied, but at that moment their conversation was interrupted by a revolver-shot from the direction in which Nida and the colonel had gone.

Mademoiselle sprang to her feet with a little shriek, but Giles only lifted his rifle and tried to peer through the trees.

"Don't be alarmed," he began, coolly; but just then two other shots followed the first, and he quickly arose and strode toward the quarter of interest.

A fourth shot lengthened Percival's steps, but Violette kept by his side and one of her hands was on his arm.

"Oh, what is the matter?" she demanded, with several French exclamations thrown in as punctuation marks to her question.

Giles did not answer, and just then they passed through a thicket and saw a scene which was certainly very thrilling and interesting.

Just before them stood Nida and Colonel Mariot, his arm about her waist and a revolver in his unoccupied hand, while through the wood, which was at that place quite open, three or four men could be seen fleeing at full speed.

To all appearances, there had been some sort of a fight, and the colonel had put the strangers to precipitate flight.

The theory received confirmation when Mariot, on seeing Giles, abruptly shouted:

"Fire, Percival, fire! Drop the heathen!"

Giles dutifully raised his rifle, pulled back the hammer and glanced along the barrel. He was a quick and sure shot, but just as he touched the trigger Violette gave a little cry and moved his arm a fraction.

The sharp crack sounded, but Giles did not need to look for the result. He knew his aim had been sufficiently disturbed to send the bullet several yards to the right of the target.

Violette was less accurate in her observations. "Oh, look! look!" she exclaimed. "One of them is hit—see him stagger. His villainy is over—"

She paused abruptly. All had been looking at the fugitives, and when two of them suddenly fell, the observers would have been perplexed had not two rifle reports accompanied their accident.

Another moment and the survivor was menaced by a trap as two other men broke from cover.

Percival's face brightened. He had recognized Buck Butler and Gilbert, and there was reason to suppose the unknown would fare badly in their hands.

Separating a little they ran toward him, their revolvers drawn, and he slackened his pace and seemed alarmed. Once he looked over his shoulder, but the sight of Giles driving home another bullet was not reassuring.

"Surrender, you durned skunk!" shouted Buck, suddenly. "Give up at once or I'll—"

He paused and ducked his head as the man's arm went up, holding a revolver, but Roland Gilbert was in time to take the prize in the revolver shot.

His own weapon came up quickly, and as it became stationary he fired, with the same accuracy which had distinguished his work at Porcupine Pass, in the road-agent episode, and the revolver fell from the stranger's grasp undischarged, and his arm dropped to his side.

Then, as Buck and Roland still advanced, he put up his left hand, palm first, to show that he was unarmed, and the battle was over.

The victors advanced to his side, still watched by the quartette on the higher land.

Lucky it was for Colonel Mariot that no one was looking at him then. His eyes had almost disappeared among a series of scowls, and somehow he seemed very much annoyed at the turn affairs had taken.

Nida had released herself from his hold, but the ex-officer was scarcely conscious of the fact. He saw the survivor of the strangers tamely yield, and then Giles strode toward them, followed by the others.

The prisoner was standing passively, and seemed somewhat frightened, and while Gilbert kept hold of his arm Buck stroked his beard and looked at the new-comers.

"What sort o' a mare's nest hev we stumbled onto now?" asked the Ranger. "I don't exactly git the caliber o' the diffikilty, but we seen the colonel firing, an' tuk a hand. You kin see the result. What war the diffikilty, Mariot?"

"We were assaulted," said the colonel, crustily. "I put the dogs to flight by showing a bold front, but my aim was wretched and not a man could I drop. You came just in time, Buck."

"A leetle too soon for these creetur's, I should say. Mister," turning to the prisoner, "who be you, anyhow? Give an account o' yourself."

The man shook his head and then pointed to his ears.

"Deaf, be ye? That's a great misfortune. Was ye born so, or has it come on ter ye since this shoot begun? Now see hyar, you can't play that game among us. We got our eyes open some year ago. Speak right out now—who be you?"

Again a shake of the head.

Buck scowled. He had no faith in the man's claims, and he had the will to make him speak if he knew how; but just then Mariot stepped to the front.

"I think their object was to seize Miss Percival," he said.

"And you saved her, just as you used to rush to the aid of the helpless in our own country!" cried Violette, clasping her hands. "Ah! it was very like you, monsieur, and I am proud of such a countryman."

"Nonsense!" said the colonel, modestly.

"Am I not right, my dear Nida? Is he not a hero?" persisted mademoiselle.

"He bravely faced the three ruffians and saved me. I do not know how to thank him enough," replied Nida, but there was little warmth in her manner.

"Wal, ther varmint hes got ter talk, anyhow," said Buck. "His ears are all right, only they're bigger nor they should be; an' he kin talk ef he will."

"What do you want?" suddenly asked the prisoner.

He had been looking anxiously from one to another of his captors, and it was plain that whatever might have been his reason for being engaged in such work, he was sorry that he was caught, as well as greatly concerned for his future.

Mariot, in the meanwhile, had been grimacing strangely, and the prisoner seemed to hang anxiously on each twist of his features, and his sudden relapse from surliness was due to an unmistakable nod.

Mariot, however, was himself ill at ease, and before Buck could answer the last question he pushed forward to the prisoner's side.

"The man is wounded," he said. "Let us see to his hurt and then hear his story."

He began to fumble about the injured arm, while Violette engaged the attention of the others by rapid conversation.

"Be cool and tell no tales," the colonel whispered to the prisoner. "This is a bad business, but I will save you."

"They will shoot me," muttered the man.

"They shall not. Be cool, I say, and all shall be well. Trust me. Your arm is broken, but that shall be cared for, and, though you may have to go to jail for a few hours, I'll get you out; I swear it."

Buck walked toward them.

"Be you ready ter tell why you did it?" he grimly asked.

"Beca'se I was a fool; but when Sam Clark, thar, said ther gal was his darter an' this man had stole her, I was idiot enough ter mix inter ther row an' so git my wing clipped. You know now why I did it, and ef you are a man you will let ther gal go free."

He scowled at Mariot, and just then Violette came forward, her face full of pity.

"Poor man!" she said, "he fell into the trap of a schemer and suffered for what he was not to blame. Of course we will not use him harshly, for we have suffered no harm, and the wicked man who led him on is already dead."

"Bah!" said Buck. "I don't like ter go ag'in' yer opinion, young woman, but that criiter lies. Lord! can't you see it in his face an' eyes? I say he lies, an' hangin' will prove it."

The Ranger scowled blackly at the prisoner, but he did not seem so very vindictive after all. Colonel Mariot looked at him and then at Violette, lifting his eyebrows just a trifle in the last case, and the French girl renewed her pleading.

As a result, the prisoner was saved for the time, at least, and when it was found that one of his arms was really broken, he was lightly bound.

Shortly after, the entire party started for the colonel's house, from which place it was intended to send men to bring in the deceased ruffians for identification.

Giles Percival had hovered for a moment over the bodies after the others left, but when fully satisfied that they were not of Mexican cast of countenance, he strode after the others.

As he did so, he was struck by two facts. Mademoiselle Aubry was leaning on the arm of Roland Gilbert as they walked, and chatting as gayly as though no tragedy had occurred, while Nida walked with Mariot.

Giles looked surprised and thoughtful, but silently fell in behind Buck and his prisoner.

CHAPTER XVII.

A VILLAIN AND A FOOL.

If Giles Percival had known that Gilbert was the escort of the fair Violette by her own invitation he might not have been so much im-

pressed, and he might also have observed that Gilbert allowed her to do most of the talking after he had once swallowed the bait.

On the whole, the French girl was the only happy-faced person in the party at that moment. Buck was surly and vicious, Nida thoughtful and absent-minded, and Mariot alternated between vivacious conversation and gloomy silence.

Suddenly he turned to Buck.

"I think you had better take your prisoner at once to Danby," he said, "and then send down men to care for the bodies. Such business has been good of late, and the Danby folks know how to work."

"Too much work," said Buck, tersely. "Just you send two men and two hosses, and let ther former strap ther carcasses on ther latter. That's ther way to tote 'em ter Danby."

"Just as you say," answered the colonel, but a frown again crossed his face.

When they arrived at his house he sent the ladies inside, in charge of Gilbert, left Buck and Giles to guard the prisoner, and then hurried away himself to gather his herdsman.

The first person he came upon was a dark-faced man named Ralph, who claimed to be of French descent, but who was suspected by Buck Butler as having a considerable share of Mexican blood.

Mariot's face brightened and he drew a notebook and pencil from his pocket.

"Write what I tell you," he said, handing them to Ralph.

The man silently nodded.

"Write, 'The time is of no consequence, but Mariot must die. When the work is done you shall have the money I promised you. R. G.' Have you written?"

"Yes, colonel."

"Then go with all speed to the forest near the hill. There you will find two dead men lying together. Put that paper in the pocket of one and get out of sight at once. Do you understand?"

"Yes, colonel."

"Then do the work at once."

Mariot had torn out the leaf upon which the man had written. The latter then darted away with the note, the colonel returned the book to his pocket and strode on with his mouth quivering in an attempt at a smile.

"I will strike him yet," he muttered. "The day's work has thus far gone more in his favor than mine, but the note will fix him. 'R. G.' It will be a blind man who can't study Roland Gilbert out of that. I'll have him in the web yet, whether Violette succeeds or not. She is a valuable ally, for of all the plotters under the sun, give me a woman for cunning. The cards are running as well—"

He suddenly stopped, both in his muttering and in his locomotion.

"Jove! what if that cursed Butler should find Ralph's footprints near the bodies, and so learn who put the letter there?"

Evidently the possibility alarmed the colonel for a moment, but he ended with a laugh.

"No danger, I guess. It's not likely Buck will be looking for footprints, and if he does that will not prove why Ralph went there. He is shrewd and can lie fluently on the spur of the moment. he is safe."

At that very moment Ralph was proving his shrewdness. He approached the spot where lay the bodies in a direct line, thrust the note into the pocket of one, and then, without pausing longer, hastened toward the house with long strides.

Judging from his footprints, a trailer would have said he found the bodies by chance, barely looked at them; and then hurried to the house to tell the story.

When he was gone the scene was once more nearly quiet. A few small birds hopped about in the branches of the trees, but to them the bodies below had no particular significance.

A pause in events succeeded and then the bushes parted not far away and a man came forth. More than that it was hard to tell, for he was a monument of rags and prairie grass, and when we say that, the reader recognizes Mad Tom, the Rover.

Just beyond the bushes he paused, his gaze upon the bodies. The sight seemed somehow to give pleasure to his weak mind. He leaned heavily on the staff he grasped with one hand, and with the other performed a series of meaningless curves about his head.

A smile crossed his face and he looked more disordered in intellect than ever.

Then he moved forward to the dead men, run his hand into the pocket of one and drew out the very paper Ralph had lately placed there.

Once he raised his head and looked sharply about, and then a chuckle broke from his lips. He unfolded the note and gazed fixedly at the writing. The first view did not seem to satisfy him and he turned it over and over several times, as though he could not discover which side should be uppermost.

Then, dropping his crooked staff, he seated himself on one of the dead men and continued the survey.

Plainly, the note was too much for his gifts. He tried it in every position, but seemed satis-

fied with none, for the twisting and turning was repeated again and again.

At last he suddenly thrust the paper in among his rags, grasped his staff and bounded to his feet. Bending low, he gazed in the direction in which Ralph had gone; then, with a chuckle, turned on his heels, darted to the cover of the bushes and sped away as though the "foul fiend" was indeed on his track.

And with him had gone the note dictated by Mariot.

Half an hour later came the herdsmen with mules. The bodies were strapped in place and borne to the colonel's house. There he and Giles stopped them to search their pockets.

"We may find some clew," said Mariot, carelessly.

"Possibly," added Giles, indifferently.

It was possible, but no good came of the search. Beyond their weapons, nothing was found except two generous plugs of tobacco.

Colonel Mariot was surprised and angry. Never before had he known Ralph to fail. What had occurred to prevent the execution of his scheme?

Just then Ralph sauntered toward the spot. His master looked at him keenly and Ralph nodded.

Mariot was perplexed. Ralph's nod meant that the work had been done, but where was the note? Perhaps it had been hidden in some part of their garments, in which case it would be found at Danby. Just then it would not do to make a more careful search, as suspicion might be directed toward the real culprit.

Buck and two herdsmen went on their way toward Danby with all that remained of the unlucky outlaws. Mariot had found a chance to speak again with the wounded man, and the latter tried to be cheerful.

"Ralph," said his master, "where did you put that letter?"

"In the pocket of the biggest man."

"Which pocket?"

Ralph indicated with his hand, but Mariot only scowled.

"I searched that pocket myself, and it was not there."

"But I put it there, colonel."

"Then where the devil is it now?"

"Perhaps it fell out."

"Go to the wood and look."

Ralph went, but the note was not found. Mariot was angry and perplexed, but he would have been still more surprised had he known that he had been fooled by a fool.

The note was safe in the rags of Mad Tom, and only time could tell what fate had in store for it.

The afternoon adventure had seriously interfered with the pleasures projected, and when Nida spoke of going home the colonel made few objections. Horses were produced, Mariot fell into line as Nida's escort, Violette neatly captured Gilbert, and Giles, left out in the cold, nominated and confirmed himself an advance guard, and rode well in front.

On this occasion he poorly performed his duty. Something seemed on his mind, and he gnawed remorselessly at his mustache and gave all his attention to thought. An enemy might have appeared then and done him mischief, but no one did appear, and it is to be hoped that he satisfactorily settled his conundrum.

Percival's house was reached in safety and the party separated. Nida and Violette went to their rooms, Giles took Gilbert away, and the colonel, after a short conversation with Mr. Percival, returned homeward.

Mademoiselle Aubry seized the first chance to speak to her maid alone.

"Paula," said she, "are you afraid of the dark?"

"No," was the quiet reply.

"I am," said mademoiselle, shivering. "To-night, Paula, I am going out to—to meet a man—you can guess who—and I want you to accompany me."

"Yes, senorita."

"What?"

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"That is better. Don't forget yourself again, Paula, for we want to be friends. Good for both of us will come of it."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MEETING BY NIGHT.

MATTERS settled down into their usual channel at the Percival house. Shooting affairs were very common on the south-west border, and as long as the assailants had been the only ones injured, it was scarcely worth while to worry about the matter.

Mademoiselle Aubry, however, declared that she was tired and unnerved after the day's events; so she early said good-night and retired to her room and the company of Paula.

Once there, however, she took position in an easy-chair and seemed to lose her weariness. She looked toward Paula, who was arranging her hair before a looking-glass, and surveyed her critically.

Paula was a pretty girl—there was no use of denying that, and it may be Violette considered her too pretty. It was not a glance of love the French girl bestowed on her maid, and yet

they were leagued together by a common purpose and useful to each other.

Two hours passed. The entire Percival household seemed at rest. The light had been extinguished in Violette's room, but both the girls were awake and awaiting for a specified time.

Another hour and the time was at hand. They arose, threw on their outer garments and prepared to leave the house.

Paula was as cool as ever, but her mistress was perceptibly nervous. She had one of those natures that face some perils well enough, but, as she had said to Paula, she was "afraid of the dark."

They went out unchallenged and, to all appearances, unseen.

Once beyond the door, they turned their faces toward that place which, from its peculiar adaptability to the purpose, had so often been used for prearranged meetings before—the live-oak grove.

Violette shuddered as they approached it. The night was not dark, but among the spreading trees it was always black after twilight.

They seemed to be running no danger, however, on this occasion, for at the edge of the bushes Colonel Mariot met them with a friendly greeting.

"Come in out of sight," he said. "We are playing with fire and must run no unnecessary risks. Is all well inside?"

"Too well, I think, for us," answered Violette.

"What do you mean?"

"It is very clear to me, colonel, that the girl Nida is as little in love with you as Roland Gilbert is with me."

"The last part is immaterial. All I desire in that quarter is to make others think such is the fact."

"Suppose I have an ambition in the case?"

"I don't understand."

"You want a wife; why should I not desire a husband?"

Mariot started.

"You surely do not want such a beggar as Gilbert is," he said.

"Is he a beggar?"

"All of that. He only lives now by the charity of the Percivals."

Violette laughed lightly.

"We will not quarrel, colonel, but I do not believe you know whether Gilbert is a beggar or a millionaire. He is your rival in love and you expect to yet be obliged to put him out of the way to win your game. Hence, it would be awkward if I, your ally, should set my heart on Gilbert. Don't fear; I love only myself. Well, colonel, let us come to business. I have no desire to stand out here in this horrid darkness."

"I've seen too much of it to feel symptoms of awe, but, as you say, to business. Can you say anything encouraging?"

"Bah! no. I tell you we must envelop our lovers in a regular web, as we at first intended, and so turn their 'young dream' into a nightmare. Don't think to run Gilbert off the track easily. He is plucky and he is in love, and the last remark will apply equally well to Nida Percival. Colonel, your only hold is to make a bold push for the king-row and then jump every chance you get."

The words sounded strangely from the fair lips of Mademoiselle Aubry, but, somehow, she no longer seemed the angelic creature that had talked so faultlessly when with the Percival family.

"Let me alone for that," said Mariot, gruffly. "I can see my way clear if you play your cards well and luck don't go dead against me. If I can't plan to win I don't know my caliber."

"It's nothing extra. You did very well for a New Orleans gambler, but—"

He caught her arm savagely.

"Enough of that. A secret told is never safe. Come further into the trees and hear my plans. Paula will you keep watch?"

"Yes, senor."

Nothing could exceed the meekness of the Mexican girl. In the hands of one she saw fit to serve she was like clay. How far she would serve them was not clear.

She stood quietly at her post for half an hour. What Mariot and Violette said during that time she did not know, and if appearances went for anything she did not care.

The trio left the grove, Mariot bade both girls farewell and went his way, while they regained their room without being observed so far as they could see.

Violette was by that time sleepy. She directed Paula to prepare her for retiring, but in the darkness the peon girl's fingers were not so deft as by day and some little mistake threw Violette into a passion.

She ordered the maid from the room, and Paula went willingly enough.

Left alone, mademoiselle began arranging her hair to suit herself, but the whole mass suddenly fell from her hands and consternation seized upon her as a voice spoke from the darkness.

"You have a horrible temper, Aubry."

The voice was masculine, it proceeded from a

point not ten feet away, and its cool, easy tones, coupled with the fact that a stranger was in her room, almost stunned mademoiselle.

She made a movement to arise, but the unmistakable click of a revolver sounded from the same quarter as the voice.

"Sit down or you are a dead woman!"

It was a terse, quiet command, but it was an all-powerful one with Violette. She dropped into her chair, shaking from fright.

"Excellent, Aubry. Continue to be as wise as that and you are all right. I am not here to harm you in any way, shape or manner. I want to have a talk with you. Sit quietly and hear me and you are safe; but I give you fair warning that if you attempt to escape or give an alarm, I will shoot you as I would a wolf. How is it—shall we have peace or war?"

"Peace," said Violette, quickly.

The unseen man laughed lightly.

"That is common sense," he observed, approvingly. "With such an understanding we can talk in peace, but, mind you, let us have no attempt at treachery. When I take a risk I put my money in to win, and now that I have invaded this house I must have the game or lose my life. Rather than lose, I could forget that you are a woman."

"For Heaven's sake, give me a chance to speak," said Mademoiselle Aubry, hurriedly. "I am not a fool and I have no desire to invite my own death. As long as you are peaceable, you can rest assured I shall be. But why are you here?"

"To inquire what has taken you so far from New Orleans."

Violette started.

"What do you know of New Orleans?" she asked.

"Not so much as you, I admit, but I have been there, and—I've seen you there. To night you seem timid, but when you stood under the glare of the chandelier and manipulated the pasteboards, you were called brave. You carried a revolver in your dress then—"

"Enough!" interrupted mademoiselle. "I deny nothing, so say no more of my past. What do you want?"

"First, to know where you found so angelic a name as 'Violette.' Pardon me if I say you have more of the nature of the cactus than of the violet."

"Go on."

Mademoiselle spoke with perfect calmness. She no longer feared this unknown man, for she believed he did not intend her personal harm. One thing she regretted. Not far away, but beyond her reach, she had a loaded revolver. She knew very well how to use the weapon, and if she could manage to get her hands upon it she would show this dangerous stranger that she was not to be trifled with in safety.

Before that night her hand had sent men to their last home—now she would not hesitate to remove one who knew so much.

"You want the case in a nut-shell, I take it. Well, here it is. You are not a Frenchwoman, but are of Mexican blood, who has been an adventuress in New Orleans and the city of Mexico. In some of your haunts you met this Colonel Mariot. Where and when I do not know."

"Have you exhausted your information?" she sarcastically asked.

"Wait. Hear me through, and you shall have your money's worth. A month ago you were called here by Colonel Mariot, who has a dastardly scheme in hand, for which he needed your help, and you are now working to help him. Young woman, you must give up that game, or there will be a crash in the money-market and you will lose your last cent."

CHAPTER XIX.

A TIMELY SHOT.

VIOLETTE looked defiantly toward her unseen companion. Her courage was all at the front at last—the same courage which had enabled her to face the gamblers of New Orleans at times when their blood was at fever heat—and she was trying to weave a web which should envelop this strange man to his sorrow and death.

First, however, she would hear him through. "You speak with a good deal of authority, but I could laugh at your effrontery were it not for the time and place you have chosen for your interview. As it is—well, what game do you mean?"

"Better say nothing about time and place, young woman. You have just been to meet Colonel Mariot in the live oak grove, and you have been a night-bird for some years. But, to answer your last question, let me say that Mariot has a pretty little scheme which embraces several branches of his peculiar science."

"Please talk English."

"I will. He wants to marry Nida Percival, kill Gilbert, who is a rival, and then get rid of the male Percivals, father and son, in some convenient way. Only three lives, and one woman's dislike of his ugly face, stand between him and a snug little fortune, and he is not the man to be stopped by such trifles."

"Well?"

"You, young woman, are here to make trouble between Nida and Roland Gilbert, who are

drifting toward matrimony, and to sing the praises of Mariot from sun to sun."

"Well, what of it?"

"Nothing, except that your game won't work."

"Who will prevent it?"

"I reckon I shall do my share."

"What can you do?"

The unknown laughed lightly.

"More than you think, perhaps. I tell you this household shall not fall under the plots of such wretches as you. Nida is too good, and her father and brother too manly to even look at your face. Do you suppose you can ruin them?"

"Man," said Violette, in a harsh voice, "who are you?"

"Your master, woman."

"Prove it."

"Proof usually lies with the future. If you want my words verified, wait a short time; but I tell you fairly you had better get back to New Orleans. Death is stalking around pretty freely in Texas just at present, and his scythe may get near you before you suspect it."

"Tell me who you are, and perhaps I will go."

"Don't do it on my account. Stay, if you wish, and see what will come of it. As for my name and other family statistics, you'll find 'em in the family Bible. I shall not divulge."

To all appearances the stranger was a man of considerable shrewdness and experience, but in this case he had not been able to keep pace with Mademoiselle Aubry. She had taken advantage of the darkness and scored a point unsuspected by him.

Her curiosity to see the man who knew so much of her past life and her future intentions, had grown to such a degree that she was resolved to see his face if the act cost her ever so dearly, and she was not long in finding a way.

Some feet back of her lay her revolver; but nearer still, so near that her hand rested on the box as she talked, was a quantity of cartridges, bullets, caps and loose powder, and arranged in compartments of the box which contained them.

If she could not reach and use the revolver, the box furnished one means of working against her enemy.

So, while she talked, she had been scattering grains of the powder along the seat of a chair near her own, taking care that enough was not scattered to cause an explosion.

At last all was ready for her desperate attempt. She would see the face of the unknown, and then—perhaps die. At any rate she would run a risk few people would care to take.

The stranger's first warning of treachery came when a match flashed before him; but the first glimmer of light was enough to arouse him. He bounded forward like a flash, and Violette found her wrists caught in an iron grasp. She had thought to elude him, but he had moved quicker than she expected.

Still, he was too late to avert the calamity. Even as he caught her wrist, the sputtering match fell upon the powder and a bright train of light flashed up and clearly illuminated the scene.

Mademoiselle was ready with her eyes, but the unknown showed his quick wit in turn. As the match fell upon the powder, he snatched from her shoulders the shawl she had not removed since coming in, and as the light flared up she could see no more of his face than a broad forehead and a pair of menacing eyes.

He had found an impromptu mask.

"Carajo!"

With a spiteful little hiss the girl sprang back, and thrust out her hand to a shelf as though for support; but she had another purpose in view.

Her hand sought and found a revolver, and in an instant more, following closely after an anonymous click, the weapon covered the heart of the stranger, and only the touch of her finger was needed to send his soul to eternity.

All these movements had been made with surprising rapidity, and the light was still maintained by remote fragments of powder which caught one after the other; but the crisis was at hand.

Violette had a moment in which to make her shot, while if the unknown stirred to prevent her he must expose his face.

To all appearances, the chances were all in mademoiselle's favor; but the signs of the times were deceptive.

The woman had seen something of wild life in her day, and if she had been less excited she might have suspected that there was a significance in the fact that the unknown's right hand was thrust in the pocket of his coat.

Really, he had never been more at ease. He held a revolver there, and, being a dead shot, he meant to fire just one moment sooner than mademoiselle.

He did not fire, however.

Just at this critical moment there was a crash of glass, which mingled with and dulled some sort of a report outside, and Violette's revolver leaped from her grasp and went whirling to the floor.

Another instant and the room was in utter darkness.

Violette uttered a little cry, for the outside report had startled her; and a numbness about her hand, produced at the same time her revolver was torn away, led to the erroneous impression that she was wounded.

The unknown did not wait to meet further trouble.

The instant that darkness fell over the scene, he turned toward the window nearest him—which was open—placed his hand on the sill, and sprang through, regardless of the fact that several feet lay between him and the ground.

The next act in the drama came in the shape of a series of shrieks from Violette, and when, a little later, Giles Percival and Roland Gilbert appeared on the scene, weapons in hand, they found her in a chair in a state of great terror.

Giles remained perfectly cool. One glance at Violette convinced him she was only frightened; a second failed to reveal any other occupant of the room but themselves; and then he looked searchingly at the broken window and the revolver dropped by mademoiselle.

He stepped forward and laid his hand on her arm.

"My good woman, if you will use your breath in a more practical way, I would like to know what is the disturbance here."

His brusque manner had a marvelous effect on Aubry. She sprang up and looked about her, somewhat wildly, but with method in her manner.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

"Who?" Giles coolly asked.

"That dreadful man who—who— Oh! dear, I am shot—I know I am. My poor hand!"

"It's as sound as a new drum," Giles remorselessly declared, as she held up the member in question. "What sort of a target-shoot have you been having here, anyway? The window shows one bull's-eye and a chance for several more, if the general ruin goes for anything. Suppose we sit down and have a council of war."

His indifference angered mademoiselle.

"There has been a man here," she declared. "Some one crept into my room while I sat sleeping in my chair. I caught up my pistol, but he knocked it from my hand."

"Who broke the window?"

"There was a shot fired—I don't know by whom. Perhaps it went through the glass."

The fair Violette looked very innocent and truthful, but lying was an old accomplishment with her, and she did not care to give a full account of her midnight visitor and what he had said.

Very soon the other inmates of the house appeared on the scene, and there was dire alarm among the female element. The fact that there had been "a man in the house" was certainly enough to jar the nerves of any of their sex.

Giles and Roland went out on a bit of a hunting tour, but they found no sign of the strange intruder. Considerable interest was shown in a lump of lead found imbedded in a wall of the room, for all knew it was the bullet fired by the unknown, but as it was utterly shapeless it would never furnish a clue to his identity, while the strange intruder had come, seen, conquered and gone his way unknown, but even he had no means of knowing who fired the shot which aroused the house.

CHAPTER XX.

BUCK BUTLER'S "CUBS."

WHEN Giles and Roland saw that nothing could be gained by further work during the night, they endeavored to quiet the other members of the household. It was like calming a volcano. Mr. Percival possessed a good deal of nerve, despite his years, and arose to a heroic level, but Nida, Violette and Paula were frightened in the fullest sense of the word.

All of them had seen enough of wild life to help them somewhat now, but not enough to easily forget a foe who had come and gone by night.

At last, however, when the young men had promised to act as patrols during the remainder of the night, the fair trio concluded to retire, which they did in a neighborly way not before practiced.

One room was this time thought large enough to hold the three.

Morning dawned in due time, and found the Percival house standing. It looked as serene and peaceful as ever—except for the one broken window, there was not a sign of the abridged cyclone which had so shaken it the previous night.

Giles and his guest looked under Violette's window. There they found a pair of human footprints, deeply marked in the soil, and others near at hand which were less distinguishable, and might or might not have been made by the same individual.

"I am going after Buck Butler," said Giles, abruptly. "This is a case which I want sifted to the bottom. The mysterious intruder may have been one of the Scorpion Brothers, and, if so, he shall be hunted down if such a thing lies in power. Buck is the man for the work, of

course. Remain here, Gilbert, and I'll bring him in a hurry."

Roland made no objection and his friend ordered his horse, mounted and galloped away.

Buck Butler, however, appeared sooner than the self-appointed messenger.

Gilbert was leaning on his rifle, wondering at the series of adventures upon which he had stumbled when he came to Texas, when the sound of a rough voice aroused him, and he looked up to see Buck.

The latter had been in a genial mood ever since the forced emigration of the Mexicans around Danby, and it seemed a pity to turn his complacency into trouble and turmoil, but it had to be done. There was news for Buck—the affray of the previous day with the Outlaws, and the night's disturbance—and Gilbert told all briefly.

"Lord! Lord!" said Buck, dismally, "what a kentry this is gettin' ter be! A'most as bad as in ther days of ther republic. Has all ther prisons in ther States took an emetic, or what's ther racket? We hev got a big cargo o' cut-throats an' pillagers piled onter us from some source, an' ther supply is increased by every train. Durnation! show me them tracks, quick. Do, or I'll bu'st!"

Gilbert led the way to where the unknown had touched soil when he leaped from the window.

"Moccasins!" muttered Buck, at first sight. "You say ther critter talked good English?"

"So Mademoiselle Aubry told us."

"Wal, he wore moccasins jest ther same. I reckon we don't get much daylight on ther subject. Mebbe he tossed them aside when onc't cl'ar o' ther grounds, an' ef he was ter appear this minute we should not know him."

"But you can follow his trail."

"I kin try."

Buck did try, and for some distance he had no trouble. Then all signs abruptly ceased, and, the nature of the ground being unfavorable, he could not regain the trail.

"He was no fool, durn him," commented the Ranger. "I'd like ter know ther critter personally. He come an' did his business neatly, an' then stepped out like a ghost. Don't call him an idyot."

"I should sooner pronounce him a villain. Buck, do you suppose he was one of the Scorpion Brothers?"

"Don't b'lieve he was; et don't look like a Greaser's work. But, what about ther shot that war fired? You say ther shooter stood outside ther house?"

"Yes, and he must have been near at hand. The report was that of a revolver—I heard it myself."

"Let's go back."

They retraced their steps and looked for further signs. It was not easy to find the clew, but Buck finally stopped short and put up his hand.

"Hold down ther sile you now stand on. Hyer are tracks, an' ther toes turn toward ther house. Let me look afore we leap."

Gilbert obeyed. To his inexperienced eyes the faint marks on the ground were mere hieroglyphics, so he turned his face toward the window of Violette's room. He saw her moving, but his mind was mathematically employed. Even he could see that a person standing where they then were could view the interior of the room.

Doubtless it was from this point that the shot had been fired; but it had been remarkably well aimed to dash the revolver from Violette's hand.

Just then the French girl came to the window, with Nida Percival standing close behind her.

A dazzling smile passed over Violette's face; she nodded, and then kissed her hand to Gilbert.

There are times in the lives of all men when such favors thrill them through, but had mademoiselle been nearer she would have seen a dark shadow cross Gilbert's face.

He lifted his hat, bowed coldly and turned to Buck Butler, who was on his knees.

"What success?" he asked, absently.

"Thar are tracks hyer; thar sart'inly be; but they might be a mighty sight plainer. I'm afeerd thar won't much come on't. You don't see Giles Percival coming back, do yer?"

Gilbert looked toward the west, and while he did so, Buck, still looking at him secretly, spread out his hand and brushed the earth to a smooth surface, obliterating every sign of the unknown marksman's footprints at the point where they were most distinct.

He was destroying the evidence he had been so eager to find, and as he did so his face bore a look which seemed very much like alarm.

What was the matter with Buck Butler? To all appearances he had discovered too much, but what was that discovery?

Let us leave Buck for awhile, and look into his humble cabin, where he had at daybreak left the two girls he affectionately called his "cubs."

Joan and Jean were devoted to their father, but years of wild life had shown them that he

was amply able to care for himself, and on their own part they felt equally capable.

So, on being left alone, they went about their preparations for breakfast in a systematic manner. No inferior cooks were these border girls, who were so adept with their rifles, and those who had had the pleasure of eating at the cabin had always noted the neatness and skill of the Ranger's "cubs."

Of late there had been somewhat of a change in Joan. She talked less and used more refined language, was thoughtful at times, and once her father had heard her say to Jean that they ought to wear more civilized garbs.

Buck had laughed at her then, but Jean remained silent and even grave. The twin sister saw further than the parent. She knew that Joan had often met Giles Percival of late, by chance or through some one's design, and Jean would not have been a woman had she failed to see what these meetings meant to Joan.

Hence her gravity. Giles Percival was rich, handsome, and a man of the world. He had possessed wealth and knew its value, he had seen barriers lay along the social highway, and though he was pleasant and gentlemanly in his manner, it would be strange if he forgot that he was Morton Percival's son.

Was Joan doing wisely to meet him so often? It was a hard question to answer, so Jean held her peace and watched developments.

On this particular morning both sisters were in a gay and happy mood. They laughed and jested over their work until the morning meal was on the table, and then Jean went to the door to see if there was any sign of her father.

As she did so a well-defined shadow fell across the threshold, and in a moment more a man appeared in front of the doorway. Jean had paused suddenly, and then there was a brief tableau as the two looked fixedly at each other.

Jean saw a man of middle age, with a strong, well-rounded form, and a dark, firm face. He was dressed in a Texan hunting suit, but his features were those of a Mexican of unusual intelligence.

A brief pause ensued and then he lifted his hat.

"Pardón me," he said, politely, and in good English, "but is Buck Butler in?"

"No," answered Jean, curtly, for she had all of her father's dislike for Mexicans.

"Where is he?"

"Can't say. He went out on the prairie for a walk, and if you want to find him you had better follow his example."

Her words, coupled with her manner, were not to be mistaken. The man first looked surprised, and then an angry look appeared in his eyes. He opened his lips to speak, closed them again, looked inside the cabin, staring at Joan, and then centered his gaze on the steaming breakfast.

"Can you give me something to eat?" he asked.

"Very sorry, but I shall have to say no. Our stock of provisions is low—the Indians get all of the wild game and the Greasers run our cattle across the Rio Grande."

"That don't look like a famine," and he glanced again at the table.

"It's as bad as a famine for you," retorted the girl. "This is not a hotel and we don't feel like feeding the hungry this morning. Anything else I can do for you?"

CHAPTER XXI.

A DUEL INTERRUPTED.

THE manner of the "cub" was of a nature calculated to amuse a disinterested party, as it was perfectly cool and free from coarseness even while of a cutting nature, but, naturally, the Mexican failed to appreciate its prominent features.

She had angered him from the first, and now an ugly light appeared in his eyes.

He stepped back a pace, waved his hand, and then, from around a corner of the cabin, came two other men, who were very much like him except that they looked less intelligent.

"Pards," he said, imitating a bluff Texan manner, "there is breakfast for us inside. We will go in and eat it."

He advanced to the threshold and raised one foot, but just then Jean, who had been standing calmly in her former position, put out her right hand quickly, drew her little rifle into view, raised and cocked it with one motion—all so quickly that the Mexican had no time to interfere until he found the muzzle dangerously near his nose.

"The only breakfast you can get here is one of lead," said she, with astonishing coolness.

Joan advanced to her side and a second click was followed by a nonchalant exhibition of another rifle by the twin sister.

The Mexican was perceptibly amazed. Very likely he had never before seen a woman just like this Texan girl, and for a while he hesitated. Then a smile curled his lips, but not in a way to improve his looks or lessen his expression of ugliness.

"Your sample of Texan hospitality is charming," he said, "but when one faces a jaguar, it is well to have strong cards in hand. Permit

me to say, young woman, that I think you are foolish."

"In what way?"

"We are three stout men. Why will you anger us uselessly?"

Jean laughed lightly.

"Why shouldn't I? Do you suppose I am going to have my breakfast eaten by such a wolf as you? Hardly. If you want food, go and catch it."

"Not so fast, young woman. We are not so hungry for food as for revenge. We came here to square an account with Buck Butler, and, since he is not here, I think we may as well take the first installment of our revenge on his daughters."

"Ha, ha! The idea is wise and pleasant," said Jean, as calmly as ever. "How will you do it?"

"We will carry you off and burn this shanty!"

"Good! You have shown your hand; now look at mine. If you make a hostile move around this shanty, as you call it, we will scatter your small stock of brains on the grass. Do you see these rifles? They are repeaters, and by the time we get in one or two broadsides you will think a cyclone has struck you."

The Mexican was a brave man, but he was not a fool. He saw that two rifles were covering his heart, and the muzzles did not waver a particle. Buck Butler's "cubs" remained perfectly cool, and he knew one touch of their fingers on the triggers would send his soul to eternity.

He forgot himself and burst into a storm of Mexican curses.

"Go and put on your *serape* and *sombrero*," advised Joan, sarcastically.

The man snatched a revolver from his belt, a murderous fire gleaming in his eyes; but at that moment a new actor appeared on the scene, darted around the corner of the cabin, and the Mexican received two blows in quick succession.

Of these, the first sent his revolver whirling away, while the second, delivered in the breast and accompanied by the introduction of the new-comer's foot behind the Greasers' heels, laid the latter neatly on his back.

Then the assailant planted one foot on his breast, jerked a pair of revolvers from his belt, and covering each of the remaining men, introduced a question in a sharp voice:

"Hands up, or play the game with sixes for trumps! Who wants to be counted with the opposition?"

The new-comer had taken a bold stand, but one he would have found it hard to maintain alone. He had the two men at his front well covered, and any attempt on their part to draw a weapon would have proved fatal to them; but under his heel lay the leading villain, wide awake and with ample chance and will for mischief.

His hand glided toward the knife at his waist, but Joan brushed past her sister like a flash.

She had recognized the man who had thus come to their rescue. He was Giles Percival, and, for reasons of her own, Joan Butler was not disposed to see him injured.

There was another suggestive click and she presented a revolver at the head of the prostrate man.

"Keep your hands where they are or die!" she tersely said.

Giles broke into a laugh.

"We seem to hold the fort," he lightly said. "How do you like your luck in getting breakfast?"

"Let me up," said the man under his heel, with unexpected calmness.

"What for?"

"I am whipped and I know enough to acknowledge it."

For a moment Giles hesitated, and then, remembering that both the "cubs" were fine shots, he asked them to turn their weapons on the lesser villains and hold them steady. It was done and then he removed his foot from the leader.

"Get up," he said.

The Mexican obeyed and began brushing the dust from his garments as though nothing unpleasant had occurred.

Giles looked at him keenly.

"I overheard much of your conversation with these ladies," he said, "but one thing puzzles me. What grudge have you against Buck Butler?"

"He killed my brother."

"Why?"

"Well, the boy stole a horse and Butler hung him for it."

"Perhaps I ought to believe a man who is willing to confess that horse-stealing runs in his family, but, somehow, I don't. You speak too quickly and accommodatingly. I'm afraid you are lying, my good man. Who are you?"

"Pedro del Sol."

The Mexican had brushed away all the dust and, with his arms folded over his breast, was facing Giles, but his gaze was persistently fixed on the ground.

His appearance was impressive as he stood there, even to Giles. Men of genius usually

recognize the quality in each other, and as Giles marked the strong, firm face of the Mexican, and noted the grace and coolness of his movements, he knew he was no ordinary man.

Some thing familiar in his looks also gradually forced itself upon Percival's notice and he regarded him more keenly. A bluish line along his upper lip spoke of a recently severed mustache of considerable size; and as he made this discovery a lightning-like change passed over Percival's face.

Unless he was greatly mistaken, the man was *El Tigre the Chief of the Scorpions!*

The suspicion was startling and vivid, but proof was lacking. Giles had only seen *El Tigre* in the uncertain light of the chaparral fire, and this man was differently clad, beardless and less imperious than the former had been.

Giles scarcely knew how to act. If he had been sure that it was *El Tigre*, he would not have hesitated to resort to extreme measures at once, but as it was, something less objectionable must be done.

"Well, Pedro del Sol," he said, after a long pause, "I will act as the representative of Buck Butler in this case and we will settle that grudge, as well as your assault on these ladies, by exchanging shots at fair revolver distance."

"So be it," said the Mexican, never raising his eyes.

"We shall need no seconds. Let this group on my right stand as they are and watch each other. It is safe, I think. As for your revolver, it lies over yonder. Get it and stand by that bush, while I remain here. Then one of your own friends shall do the counting and we will fire at the word 'three.' Is that agreeable?"

"Yes," was the machine-like reply.

"Good. Start the mill, then."

The downcast eyes came up slowly, rested on Percival's revolver hand, and then Pedro del Sol began to move slowly backward toward where his revolver lay, still watching his enemy.

Giles smiled grimly, but he admired the caution of the man. Still, he had never shot even an enemy in the back, and Pedro was safe enough.

The two remaining Mexicans, together with the twin sisters, formed a tableau. The girls did not speak, but their revolvers were held unwaveringly, and the Greasers, on their part, showed the same stoical manner that had marked their leader.

They had talons and the will to use them, but they were wise enough to know that one movement to draw would result fatally to them.

The leader reached his revolver, lifted it and put his back to the bush as directed by Percival. His manner, however, had changed—even from where he stood, Giles could see that the meek air had vanished and the Mexican held his head haughtily erect.

"Count," said Giles, looking at one of the Greasers.

The man promptly obeyed, and the duelists faced each other grimly, but the first word had scarcely passed the fellow's lips when there was a crashing in the bushes behind Pedro del Sol and still another man appeared on the scene of action.

CHAPTER XXII.

BUCK BUTLER SEEKS FOR LIGHT.

EVIDENTLY the last comer had not appeared as a mere spectator, for he at once pressed to the front in an emphatic way.

Pedro del Sol had sprung to one side at the first sound, and then he had a view of a strange figure which looked like a man disguised by a mass of rags and prairie grass—in brief, Mad Tom.

The Rover bore his long, crooked staff, and seemed even wilder than usual, but there was method in his madness.

Straight toward Pedro del Sol he sprung, and in a moment more his staff swept through the air. The Mexican saw his danger and attempted to avoid it, but the club struck him on the arm and once more his revolver went flying through the air.

The spectators looked on in surprise. Mad Tom was not usually so violent, and they knew not what to make of his outbreak.

The two Mexicans by the cabin, however, were not slow to perceive that they were for the time unwatched; and with a simultaneous dash they started around the cabin.

A single shot followed them. Joan's revolver had failed to explode; but Jean sent a lump of lead through one man's arm as they took to flight.

Meanwhile, Pedro del Sol had not been idle. He plainly saw that if he attempted resistance the Rover would beat him to a jelly, so he made an agile dodge and gained the cover of the thicket, closely followed by his strange assailant.

One moment they were hidden from the sight of those by the cabin, and then Del Sol reappeared, running at a pace which promised to save him.

Giles Percival caught up Joan's rifle, raised the hammer and then hesitated. He could

easily have shot the fugitive, but he was in doubt as to the justice of the deed. Had he known positively that El Tigre was before him, the shot would have been promptly fired; but proof was lacking and he had no desire to shoot an ordinary man in the back if he was a villain.

Mad Tom gave prompt pursuit, but his mantle of grass impeded his movements, and Del Sol went five yards to his two, a fact which seemed to impress even his disordered mind.

He ceased running and turned slowly back.

Giles stood irresolute and saw the three Mexicans running toward a common point off on the prairie. Time only could tell whether he had done wisely. If the trio were common Greasers, they had, to his thinking, had punishment enough. If they were El Tigre and his men—well, in that case his mercy had been misplaced and his life laid open to future attacks.

The thoughtful frown on his face impressed the sisters, and no one spoke until the Rover arrived on the scene.

His personal appearance was the same as when we have seen him before, and he seemed to have forgotten his late encounter. He held his staff in one hand, leaning heavily upon it, and put out the other supplicatingly.

"Do poor Tom some charity," he said, in his deep, hoarse voice. "Give unto him who is needy, and every night he will pray that you may be safe from the foul fiend. May you never know what misery is Tom's; may you never be forced to live on 'rats and mice and such small deer.' Bless thy fine wits: thy hearts are kind."

"What can I do for you?" asked Giles, gently, for he had ever pitied the unfortunate man.

"What?" repeated the Rover. "What? Ha! ha! Let me tell you."

He strode forward and grasped Percival's arm, crouching down until the long grass tied in his ragged garments arose around his face like a hedge. From that face his eyes gleamed wildly, and wrinkles crossed his cheeks and forehead like the lines of a spider's web.

"I'll tell thee what to do. Go catch me ten thousand milk-white steeds, and let each one be black as night. Go catch the leaping lightning and chain it to a tree. Make water run up a hill and turn the foul fiend to a prairie-dog. Do this, and Tom will bless thee. Neglect it, and ten thousand horrors seize upon you. Ah! Tom's a-cold!"

The strange being flung off Percival's arm, drew his rags closer about him and swayed to and fro on his staff.

Giles looked at the sisters and shook his head gloomily, but the Rover suddenly erected his head and leveled one finger at some imaginary spot on the ground.

"Ha! see!" he exclaimed. "The foul fiend comes! Watch him drag his form along the ground. Now, wait, wait, wait! Poor Tom will show him wisdom. Ay, look and you shall see me kill him. When I've slept he has placed scorpions in my bosom and tied tigers to my heels. I'll strike him, now—there! and there! and there!"

With each exclamation he struck the ground with his staff, but those who looked saw nothing. Then he suddenly raised his head again, placed his hands to his mouth and sounded a note like the call of a horn.

Sweeping one hand around to his ear, he seemed to listen for a moment and then bounded away toward the west, unheeding the utterance of his name by Jean.

Giles drew a long breath.

"Poor fellow!" he half-unconsciously said.

"I wish something could be done for him," added Jean.

"Father Butler says no one can help him but the Master of Life," replied her sister.

"Do you suppose he was hungry?" asked Jean, glancing at the breakfast on their own table.

It was a question not easily answered, and after some further conversation about the Rover and the late Mexican callers, Giles asked after Buck Butler.

Finding that he was every moment expected to appear, they only waited to make sure that Pedro del Sol and his friends were still going, and then entered the cabin.

An hour passed pleasantly, and in conversation with the girls Giles almost forgot the object of his visit.

Jean had the least to say, but her eyes were busy.

She saw that an unusual flush was on the cheeks of Joan—she saw how her eyes sparkled, and how she listened to each word from Percival's lips.

Ah! Joan, you may yet be blind yourself, but there is one who sees clearly. The eyes of Jean are open, and she knows it is love that makes her twin sister so interested in the heir of Morton Percival's wealth.

She turns to look at Giles. A fine form, a regular, manly face, and a smile which is like light—dangerous attractions for a young girl to meet. And that face of his—it is not easy to read. A stronger will than Jean's lies behind his massive forehead, and though the sister watches and tries to read him more clearly, the strong face baffles her.

She sighs, and unwillingly leaves all to time.

Buck did not come; and at last tired of waiting, Giles took his departure and started homeward.

It was an hour later that the Ranger came in. He looked searchingly at his daughters, but both seemed as usual. They greeted him kindly, and asked if there was any news.

"Yas," he said, slowly; "ther man I took in ther woods, about whom I told yer, has got outer prison. He slipped away last night, an' no one is ther wiser."

"How was it done?"

"That thar is ther mystery. They say he gnawed off his bonds, but I say he had help. Cubs, you needn't be surprised ter see my Regulators out in force one o' these days. Ther air has got ter be purified somehow, an' I'm ther critter ter do it. Things has gone from bad ter wuss, an' a good 'eal beynd it."

"I should say so," added Jean.

"Cubs," said the Ranger, suddenly raising his head, "which one o' you was out last night?"

"Both," said Joan.

"Wal, which one fired ther shot that broke a winder in Percival's house?"

He looked at them keenly, glancing from one to the other, but both met his gaze firmly and with seeming honesty.

"I was five miles west of here, and I did not go the other way after dark," said Jean.

"I was east," admitted Joan, "but not near Mr. Percival's."

"One o' you was thar," said Buck, firmly.

"Father!" exclaimed Jean.

"Cubs," said the Ranger, gravely, "I wish I could say I am wrong, but I can't. I see'd tracks which I kin swar was made by one o' you. Now, which one was it? Ef thar is any mystery in ther case don't be afeerd to trust me, but don't deny it. I never knowed one o' yer ter lie in ther last ten year. Which one was it?"

"It was not I," said Joan, stoutly.

"And I was five miles west of here," added Jean.

"Don't!" said Buck, quickly. "I'd rather lose my rifle than ter hev one o' my cubs lie ter me. I tell yer I see'd ther tracks. As I've said afore, you two make a track so much alike no man kin tell one from t'other; but no other person, male or female, in Texas, kin duplicate it. One of you was thar—which?"

"Neither," said Joan, a little warmly. "But, Father Butler, wouldn't it be well to tell us what has occurred before you give us over to Judge Lynch?"

He told of Violette's midnight adventure as he had heard it.

"Both trails was blinded a few rod from ther house," he added, "an' I reckon no good will come o' looking fuder thar; but I know one o' you fired ther shot that broke ther winder an' lodged in ther wall. Now, cubs, don't dodge ther question any more. Which o' you was it?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

GILBERT TRIES HIS LUCK.

It was easy to ask the question, but Buck might as well have held his peace. Both girls persisted in their former statements, even when they saw a frown gather on his face, which was unlike any look to which he had previously treated them.

Rough of manner, and often too stern in dealing border justice the Ranger was, but toward his "cubs" he had over been kind and tender. No girl of wealth and civilization's center ever had a kinder father.

Now there were tears in their eyes as they saw the frown on his face, for they knew he was deeply hurt, and they saw, too, that that iron will he had shown in dealing with criminals could be extended to those of his own flesh and blood if need be.

He arose, took his rifle and went out in silence. They dared not stop him, and for the first time in ten years they had parted in anger.

The Ranger had much to annoy him. By an unspoken but general voice of the people about Danby he had for some time been the chief officer of the law along that section of the Rio Grande. When the Regulators were needed, he led them; when a crime was committed, he trailed down the perpetrator, and he had long been considered infallible in his line of business.

Yet, of late, he had met with mystery after mystery only to be baffled. Law-breakers were seemingly as thick as wolves, and each and every one covered up his trail with admirable skill. Buck's pride was hurt, and, besides that, he saw his loved Texas moving backward in civilization despite all his efforts to root out the evil-doers.

About the same time Giles Percival was telling Gilbert about the encounter at Buck's cabin and speculating on the possibility that Del Sol was the Scorpion chief.

Roland advanced the opinion that he was not, and gave the further opinion that the Scorpions had given up the battle and gone back to Mexico to stay.

Giles slowly shook his head.

"I feel in my bones that I am not through with them. Whatever ax they are trying to

grind, they are in dead earnest, and some crowning tragedy is needed to end the vendetta. As I have repeatedly told you, I am not the man they are after, and I can't see the justice of calling on me for a burnt-offering; but I believe they are still on the track, and we must fight it out."

Gilbert saw the folly of trying to shake his companion's belief, and conversation drifted to the adventure of the previous night. All day long Mlle. Aubry had been keeping close to the sitting-room, and there could be no doubt but that she had received a severe shock.

As the two men talked the affair over, the idea crept into Gilbert's mind that Giles knew more of the affair than he told. He seemed little interested in their fair guest, and at times spoke of her almost sneeringly, and Roland suspected there was a cause for his course.

If the idea was correct, he kept his own counsel, though when they met Violette at dinner he looked sharply at Giles. The latter's strong face was as calm as ever and told no tales.

Violette was really nearly ill. She started at every sound, looked badly, and after dinner announced her intention of retiring to her private apartment, with Paula for her companion.

They went; Mr. Percival and Giles dropped out of the room on some mission, and Gilbert and Nida were alone.

The young man was not at all displeased. On the contrary, he had of late seen too little of his charming hostess. Since the coming of Violette she had somehow appeared to interrupt all of their *tete-a-tetes*, and then, too, mademoiselle had a fashion of capturing Gilbert and making him her gallant, whether he was willing or not.

At last he was alone with Nida, but for some time their conversation was scarcely cheerful. They had been treated to a series of tragedies during the last few days, and had not Nida possessed an abundance of latent strength she too, would have succumbed as Violette had done.

Gradually, however, the young couple forgot the darker side of life, as young people will, and their conversation became more lively and interesting.

Gilbert entered somewhat into an account of himself. He had made money in Arizona and New Mexico, and expected to make more in the future. In the course of time, however, he hoped to leave his wild life and settle down in a quiet home.

Nida listened, made frequent comments, and gave her spoken and sincere sympathy and encouragement. There is something very pleasant about having a pretty girl thus enter into one's plans and ambitions, but in Gilbert's case, it was doubly so.

He loved Nida Percival, and every plan that he had lately laid for the future included her. When he saw a home for himself in the future, the picture included her, also.

Such being the case, it was not strange that, having so good an opportunity, he soon found himself telling her about it. An hour before, he had not once thought of speaking so soon, but it was just as well.

When a man goes to a dinner, or to any other place where he is expected to make a speech, it is well to have the words and sentences all arranged, but love is not a creature of method.

That man who proposes by means of elaborately planned words, is neither wise nor in love.

Evidently, Roland Gilbert performed his work in a manner satisfactory to himself and Miss Percival, for, to make it as brief as possible, we will clearly say that they were betrothed when Giles came in somewhat later.

Nida needed no time in which to make her answer. She cared for Gilbert most sincerely, and she knew that her father and brother shared her opinion.

What more was necessary?

As Giles came in, he looked at them once, keenly, and then made some careless remark and took a chair just as Mr. Percival entered, after which conversation became general.

Another night fell, and the Percival household looked to their weapons and measures for safety as carefully as though they had been holding some feudal castle of olden times.

If any malicious person intruded during the night, they wished to give him a warm reception.

Giles and Roland took frequent turns about the house during the evening; but time passed on quietly, and no Jibbensinoy or other object of alarm appeared to their view.

The hour was late when Giles Percival retired to his room, and his rest had been so much broken of late, that he was decidedly sleepy. He yawned as he set down the lamp, and then dropped into a chair and began pulling off his boots.

Half through with this work, he suddenly paused and stared blankly at the opposite wall of the room.

There he saw a bowie-knife driven deep into the wood, while, impaled on the blade, was a sheet of paper; and on the white surface showed in red characters the Sign of the Silver Scorpion!

One moment Giles looked, and then, without arising from his chair, he drew a revolver and looked about the room. He expected to see one

or more of the mystic band ready to receive him, and his own face bore a look of fierce resolve; but, except for his own occupancy, the room was vacant.

Satisfied of this, he looked at the windows. He was between the two and where no one could see him from the outside. Was it safe to expose himself? He resolved to try the experiment, and no harm came of it.

Then he advanced to the wall and wrenched away the knife. The paper fluttered to the floor and lay face uppermost, the figure of the scorpion showing in a color which seemed to be of blood.

Never losing his coolness, Giles examined both articles curiously, but no more was to be discovered. The knife had seen considerable service, but bore no name or mark by which it could be traced. The paper was equally unpromising as a clew.

He sat down and held them in his hand in a thoughtful way.

"So I am still menaced by the life-hunters. Their hatred seems beyond satisfaction by ordinary methods—only my life-blood will pay the debt. All this would be pleasant enough if only their own wishes were to be consulted. Unfortunately I am an interested actor in the drama and I do not like the programme. No! and, by Jupiter! I won't have it! The Scorpion Brothers may plot, strike and rage, but I defy them and I will fight 'em foot to foot."

The strong face was more impressive than usual just then, but as he considered the matter even he was forced to admit that the outlook was dark. He was but a single man, while the Silver Scorpions might be many scores in number.

Moreover, their way was secret and deadly. When they struck, it was usually in the dark and in the back. Added to this, they seemed to have strange ways of going and coming, even in the Percival house. The articles he held in his hands had been put in place by some one standing in the room.

Who was that person, and how had he gained entrance to the room unseen?

"Retribution is on my track," said Giles, abruptly. "I have sinned and I am called to pay the debt. If the Silver Scorpions have their way, payment will be swift, but I shall fight for life. It is too late to turn back; I will fight to the end. If I fall, no one will mourn for me if my past is laid bare. That's not a pleasant thought for a man, and I wish— But, bah! After my career I should not deal in sentimentality. Come on, Scorpions, and we will fight out our strange vendetta!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

PAULA.

GILES went to bed calmly, leaving the knife and the scorpion figure on the table near at hand, but he did not go to sleep at once. It had occurred to him that the reminder of the warfare waged against him might be followed by a speedy attack, and with his hand on his revolver he lay awake and listened, waited and reflected.

The more he thought about it, the more he believed that there was something mysterious in the way the knife and paper had come in his room.

It did not seem reasonable that, when the vicinity was so closely watched, a stranger, and a Mexican at that, could steal in and accomplish the work unseen.

"By Jupiter!" said Giles, internally, after some reflection, "the knife was put there by some one an inmate of this house. I know it. Good; so much found out I will look for more. We have an agent of the Silver Scorpions in our midst. Who is it? Not my father or sister, that is sure. Gilbert? Ridiculous. That only leaves Mademoiselle Aubry and Paula. Which of them is the party?"

Giles contracted his brows into a series of frowns. Of late he had come to think poorly of Violette Aubry? He had decided that she was making a desperate attempt to insnare Roland Gilbert, and he believed her object was money.

On his part, Giles could plainly see that Gilbert and his sister were looking upon each other with more than ordinary interest, and as women are much more observing in such matters than men, it followed that Violette must know it, too.

So, Giles had despised the self-styled French girl for coming into a family to break up any ties, and this was why he had been so indifferent to her late peril.

Yes, he thought poorly of Violette, but, somehow, he did not believe she had any connection with the Scorpion Brothers.

This narrowed the list of suspected parties down to Paula, the peon girl.

Paula! A pretty girl, even though she might not have patrician blood in her veins. A well-torned, pretty-faced, neat-looking girl was the peon, and Giles had always thought her a model servant as he saw her gliding about on her duty.

Now, he doubted her. She had the same blood, in part, at least, as the men of the League. It would not be strange if she was one of their agents.

"She will bear watching," thought Giles. "I've got a good deal of work on my hands, just now, for I have not forgotten my suspicion that there is something between Aubry and Mariot. What? If he placed her in this household with a purpose, as I suspect, what was the purpose?"

The question was easier asked than answered, but Giles Percival was the man to press any complicated matter to a solution.

The night passed peacefully.

On the following day all had in a measure recovered their usual composure. Violette appeared with the old smile on her face, and at the breakfast table showered tender glances on Gilbert.

Giles observed her attentively and reflected. He was more polite than usual toward her, but he had a trap in store for her.

When the table was deserted, he skillfully foiled her attempt to capture Gilbert, and himself secured her company. Ostensibly, he wanted her opinion on a stanza in a book of poems, but from that subject they went to books in general, where she betrayed her ignorance.

Books had never charmed her, and though she had learned the ways of polite society during her career as an adventuress, she could not have told whether Charles Dickens wrote "David Copperfield," or whether that immortal book owed its origin to a gentleman named Barnaby Rudge.

Gradually, Percival led the conversation around to France. She showed an inclination to avoid the subject. He asked from what part she had come, and she said from Lyons. He questioned her about the place, and she gave some information, but her evident anxiety to avoid the subject became so great that she finally ended the *tete-a-tete* without ceremony or show of politeness.

Giles, however, was satisfied. He had himself been in Lyons, and though it was evident that she had read something about the place, or had been carefully instructed, it was equally clear to him that she had never seen the city herself.

Thus he gained one point—he had found that Mademoiselle Aubry had lied in one respect, at least, and there was room for further suspicion.

He surveyed Paula as much as was safe, but made no attempt to catch her as he had done Violette. Quiet as the peon girl seemed, she clearly had a far deeper mind than the so-called French girl.

Colonel Mariot made his appearance on the scene, and both he and his reputed countrywoman began to play a little game of wits. The hero of a war desired the exclusive company of Nida; the ex-queen of the gaming-table wished to capture Gilbert.

Giles Percival stood like a rock in the way. He baffled the plans of every one, and nearly quarreled with Mariot about the qualifications of a certain dog possessed by the colonel. He was a ghost at the banquet to at least two of the party, and those he aspired to aid could not but think him rude.

He remained indifferent to all wondering looks, however, and gained his end by baffling Mariot and Violette all through the occasion.

That afternoon Giles indulged in a sleep which he meant should last him over night. During the coming hours of darkness he meant to keep watch over the house and its inmates, and see what occurred out of the usual line. To further his ends, he had asked Buck Butler to act as an outside guard, and, between them both, they hoped to learn something of importance.

At his usual hour for retiring, Giles went to his room. On this occasion, no messages from the Scorpions or other secret leagues appeared. He kept his light going for ten minutes and then extinguished it and became quiet.

He did not, however, retire, but, stealing from the room, lay down on the floor in the darkness at a point where he could watch Paula's door.

An hour passed. The house had long since been quiet, and it seemed as though every one was sleeping peacefully and innocently.

Giles waited patiently, and his waiting was at last rewarded. The door of Paula's room moved softly, receded two or three inches at one side and then became stationary.

A pause of at least five minutes followed. The door again moved, this time swinging back until the space was wide enough for a person to pass.

The watcher did not stir. He lay as though a part of the floor, and even his breathing was subdued. He felt sure he was on the eve of a discovery.

Another pause was followed by a soft rustling within Paula's room and then, like a shadow, some one glided through the door and stood in a listening attitude.

Giles watched grimly. Only a few feet separated them. He could have sprung up and seized her before she could return to her room, but this was far from his purpose.

For a little while Paula hesitated and then glided away with a cat-like step. Giles made

no haste to follow. He knew he could not imitate her almost noiseless movements, and he felt pretty sure of the course she would take.

Moving at a respectful distance behind her, he saw her open the rear door of the house and pass out. He turned to one side, raised a window and passed carefully through.

The night was only moderately dark and he could see Paula. She was moving across the field and her face was toward the live-oak grove. He smiled quietly and followed.

By the time he reached the trees, the peon girl had disappeared. His work was now difficult and, if enemies were within the grove, extremely dangerous. Only a few trees were embraced in the group, but each one was large and spreading, so that considerable ground was covered and the branches, drooping at the ends, made an inclosure which was impenetrably dark.

Giles parted the branches and listened. All was silent. He entered and again paused. Not a sound reached his ears to indicate that a human being was occupying the place in company with himself.

His situation was not a pleasant one, for few men like to prowl about in the dark when they know they are liable to run upon a knife or revolver; but he remained cool, and with his hands on his weapons, began to investigate further.

Keeping near the curtain of branches, he began a circuit of the inclosed space, his movements being slow and noiseless.

What he expected soon came to pass, and as the murmur of voices floated to his ears, he recognized the soft tones of the peon girl.

So far all was well, but the most difficult part of all was at hand—to gain a position where he could hear what was being said.

He was laying his plans elaborately, when, suddenly, there was a movement on the part of the other persons, and they came straight toward him, though evidently unsuspicious of his presence.

Without stirring from his tracks he crouched beside the leafy curtain, and with weapons well advanced, awaited their coming.

They paused when so near that he could have touched them, and he felt sure that he was discovered.

CHAPTER XXV.

UNDER THE LIVE-OAKS.

GILES PERCIVAL'S fear was groundless. Close beside him stopped the two, and a rustling of clothing showed that one was a woman, but neither saw the dark figure which crouched on the ground.

"Where shall I see you again?" asked a masculine voice, which was of a tender inflection.

"Who can tell in such times as these?" asked the woman, and Giles knew it was Paula who spoke. "Ah! I am so afraid! What one of us is safe? Men die strangely, and the list is large. The other night a strange man entered the room of my new mistress, and another man fired a shot which nearly killed her. How can I promise when life is so uncertain?"

"Listen to me, Paula," said the man, earnestly. "You have well described the situation around here, and I need not repeat it, but I ask you now why should we stay here and risk our lives? You have promised to become my wife, and if we leave Texas all will be well. We are risking too much by staying here. Let us go to some other State and leave all these plotters forever."

"Ah! if I could! But, Ralph, I cannot."

"Cannot? And why?"

"Because—because I have promised to stay."

"Whom have you promised?"

"There, there, Ralph; do not be jealous. Do not speak so quickly. I care for no one except you; but I have had to fight my own battles, and—take aid from those who would help me."

The explanation had only complicated matters, and the man's voice arose to an unguarded pitch.

"What do you mean?"

"Hush! Ralph, hush! Some one will hear you. Ralph, you must trust me a little. I was placed here by Colonel Mariot and others, and I promised to remain while they wished it."

"I'll talk to the colonel. I have done him some favors, and he ought to oblige me some. I want to get out of Texas."

Giles was listening eagerly. He had not failed to recognize in "Ralph" the servant of Mariot, and Paula had said a good deal that was of interest. She had been placed there by Mariot "and others." Who were these others, and why had they placed her there?

He hoped to have the question answered, and so listened closely, but what followed was not of interest.

Ralph spoke of his plans for the future, and acted the devoted lover, but all this did not interest the eavesdropper. He wanted to hear Paula talk of her mysterious friends, but the subject had been dropped for the occasion, and they soon prepared to separate.

They left the cover of the live-oak in earnest

conversation, and went toward the door of the house.

Giles prepared to follow at a proper distance, but just as he was about to move a voice broke in on his solitude.

"How does it go, young feller? See anything o' consequence?"

Giles had started at first, but he turned around quietly as he recognized Buck Butler's voice.

"No, have you?"

"Not yet. I've been a-spyin' a bit on these turkle-doves what hes jest left us, but I don't see any venom about them."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"What did you hear?"

"Paula said she was placed in our household by parties she did not wish to name—"

"I heard that, but what on it?"

"I believe those parties are the Silver Scorpions. There was something strange about the way in which that dagger-pierced paper got to my room. I have from the first believed it was done by some member of the household, and now I clearly connect Paula with the deed."

"Mebbe it was her. She's got bad blood, an' it's bound ter crop out. 'Tenyrate, she'll b'ar watchin', an' you an' me will take ther job. Fur now, s'poseden we take a turn round ther house an' see what's ter be seed."

They did as he had said, but during the whole circuit saw nothing suspicious. To all appearances, no one except themselves was abroad.

They paused again near the grove, and began talking on the recent mysteries of Danby. Where so much had occurred, it was natural their thoughts should run in one channel.

Buck found himself peculiarly placed. His opinion that Giles knew more of the Silver Scorpions than he would admit had never wavered since the night when they had fought El Tigre in South Forest, and the Ranger felt some reluctance to help a man who was asking him to work in the dark.

At the same time, he admired Giles as one brave man will admire another. He was deeply impressed by the young man's coolness under such trying circumstances. There is nothing so calculated to demoralize one as a secret, stealthy danger, and in the midst of it all Percival never wavered.

Suddenly the latter's hand fell on Buck's arm. He spoke no word, but his movement seemed to call for silence. Buck asked no question; he, too, had heard the cracking of a dry stick under the live oak.

Together they stepped to where the drooping branches wholly concealed them from view, and then stood like statues.

Looking toward the trunk of the tree, they could dimly see three or four dark forms. Was it fancy, or could they also distinguish the *sombrero* and *serape*—the national garb—that marked the native Mexican?

Giles pressed his companion's arm, and both stood with their weapons ready but in utter silence.

The strangers, too, stood quietly, and without indulging in speech. They were not men of stone or marble, and yet they seemed to have nothing to say.

Giles and Buck were not long in accounting for this—they were probably awaiting for another person, man or woman.

Ten minutes passed, but the scene remained unchanged. The pause was growing uncomfortable to the watchers, who would not venture a movement.

Then one of the strangers spoke. Only the murmur of his voice reached the ears of the Texans, but, though no word was distinguishable, the Spanish tongue was perceptible.

Again Giles pressed the Ranger's arm.

The mysterious men muttered for some minutes; then followed a period of silence, which was broken by one of them as he walked to the southern side of the inclosure, parted the foliage and looked through.

Evidently he was looking for some one; but the man came not.

Half an hour passed without any change in the situation.

By that time there was not room for any doubt as to the purpose of the prowlers. They were there to keep an appointment, but one, at least, of their number failed to appear; and it was just as clear that this fact made an important hitch in the programme.

They talked earnestly for a while; and then, as one man, they turned away, passed through the leafy curtain, and walked rapidly toward the west.

"Are they really gone?" Giles demanded.

"I believe they be, an' I'm a-goin' ter foller ther reptyles."

"I dare not leave here: I must watch over Nida and my father."

"Stay, by all means, boyee. Git inside speedy an' stay thar, but don't shet yer eyes ter-night. Blow out your light, but stay nigh ther winder, an' ef you hear a stun strike it, look out fur me. Don't sleep ter-night!"

Buck repeated the warning earnestly, pressed his companion's hand and started off at a trot after the strangers. They had disappeared in

the darkness, and it would not do to give them too much headway.

Giles retraced his steps and re-entered the house. Reaching his own room he sat down in the dark, but he did not feel at ease. Doors and windows had been opened since closed for the night, certain persons had gone out and in to his knowledge and there was no knowing how many others had done the same.

No wonder he felt ill at ease as he reflected that the house might even then contain skulking assassins.

"I'll run the risk of a light long enough to make a circuit and see that all is well," he thought.

He found his lamp, started a blaze and examined his own room. All was as he had left it. Then he went out and visited other places. The rooms of the elder Percival and Roland Gilbert were quiet.

From there he passed to the other part of the house, pausing several minutes at Violette's door. It was silent there, and, though he would have given much to be sure that she was really sleeping, he was obliged to pass on.

A few feet away was Nida's room. He looked and saw the door closed as usual, but as he pressed forward his foot suddenly touched some object upon the floor.

He had not up to that time looked downward, but as he did so he instinctively sprung back with a long bound and the light almost fell from his hands.

A startling sight was before him.

On the floor lay the body of a man—a body only, as was told by the distorted face which looked up at the ceiling. The stamp of death was on that face, and Giles Percival had seen enough of wild life to know how death had come.

The staring eyes, the protruding tongue, the discolored face, all combined, told that the wretch had met his end by strangulation.

The position of the body and limbs was not far from natural, suggesting that he had been moved after death; but the brother leaned against the wall, faint and dizzy for a moment, as he reflected that this horrible wreck of a human life lay at the door of Nida's room.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DEAD SCORPION.

ONLY for a moment did Giles give way to his unusual weakness. His nerves resumed their wonted firmness and his face its old composure. He was again the bold and resolute man.

With his hand at his belt, where were his weapons, he remained quiet for a while, peering into the darkness. No shadowy form was visible and the house was as still as a tomb.

Then he moved forward and touched the dead man. His person was still warm. Giles lowered his light and saw on the muscular neck the marks of human fingers, and as he saw how strong the dead man had been he knew his slayer must have been possessed of tremendous power.

Giles hesitated for a moment. He had work to do, but he did not intend to alarm the house, and, first of all, he desired to know if all was well with Nida.

The feeling was not to be overcome. He silently opened her door, advanced his light and looked within. She lay upon the bed, calmly sleeping, and he again closed the door and turned away.

Next he went to Gilbert's room. They had previously made arrangements by which they could quickly awaken each other, and the guest was soon unfastening his door.

Giles told his story at once, but in a manner of complete composure. Roland listened, grew startled, perplexed and then calm, by turns.

"What do you make of it?" he asked at the end.

"I have a suspicion, but it may not be as I think. Dress and come with me. We will carry the body to my room and keep watch and ward the remainder of the night."

The first part of the plan was successfully carried out; they conveyed the body to Percival's room without arousing any one, and laid it on the floor.

Giles looked down at the set face with a stern expression on his own handsome features.

"A Mexican, I can swear, though he was never a fool. Intelligence and cunning lurked back of that forehead, but he somehow ran his head into a hornet's nest. I'll look at him."

He bent over the body and deliberately tore open his clothing at the breast. Gilbert watched with interest, for he could not but comprehend his friend's object.

Then Giles threw back his head, drew out his hand and held up to the light something which sparkled in the rays of the light.

It was the sign of the Silver Scorpion!

Ay, all was there, just as both men had seen it before—the golden chain, the coral block and the silver reptile—the talisman of the strange and deadly league whose purpose and nature no one had as yet seemed to penetrate.

"Good Heavens!" said Gilbert, "he was one of the Scorpion Brothers."

"So it seems," answered Giles, coolly. "I thought as much from the beginning, but this settles it."

"But, how in the world did he happen to be in this house?"

"I have a theory," said Giles, slowly. "Those fellows who met under the live-oaks spoke Spanish. I suspected then they were of the band. They expected some man, but he did not come. Now, I have a theory that they, together with this man, had been sent by El Tigre, their chief, to enter our house, or do some other piece of villainy. This

man, on his way, saw either Paula or myself leave the place, and he came in by the same way we went out."

"Or the peon girl may have admitted him."

"I doubt it. In such a case, he would have waited until his fellows had joined him. Well, to continue my theory, he entered and began prowling around. He found his way to the door of Nida's room, and, perhaps, he was on the point of entering. It may be he had entered the house to murder her. He reached her door, but—"

"Well?"

"I judge he did not enter. This carcass tells the rest."

"But, who killed him?" Gilbert asked, earnestly.

"That is just what I do not know. It was not Buck Butler, nor you, nor myself. Clearly, it was not my father, for he has not the strength to accomplish the work. No one but a powerful man could have strangled this fellow with bare hands."

"And without giving an alarm."

"True. His work was remarkably well done. Now, I haven't the slightest idea who it was. Have you?"

"No."

"I cannot imagine why he should do his work and so strangely disappear," added Giles, frowning thoughtfully.

"He has proved his friendship, anyway."

"True, for there is no knowing what harm this fellow would have done. My God! do the Silver Scorpions mean harm to Nida? I could fight them foot to foot, but she— Ah! Gilbert, she is too good for such a fate."

"And so are you."

"I? Thanks, but you don't know me, my good man. No fate would be too bad for me. I—but, bahl! what am I saying? Let me look this fellow over further."

The dead man's person was closely searched, but nothing of interest was found. Gilbert stood looking down upon him when he thought he detected something white in his hand.

He bent lower and found the stiffening member closed around a paper. His grasp was loosened with an effort, and Gilbert raised the paper thus secured.

In appearance it was like a leaf hurriedly torn from a note-book, and across one side was a single line of writing:

"Lock the door before the horse is stolen."

Only those eight words, and without a signature. Even the writing was coarse, irregular and erratic; but the fact that the grammar was better than the writing led to the suspicion that either the latter was disguised or written in the dark.

Mysteries accumulated rapidly. Whoever had killed the Mexican must have been a true friend, for he had not only stopped the course of the prowler, but administered a rebuke on the carelessness which had enabled him to enter; and yet, when his work was done he had taken himself away in a very unsatisfactory manner.

Gilbert aroused from a period of thoughtfulness, and looked at Giles. The latter sat on the floor, his elbow on a chair, his head upon his hand, and his face marked with mingled wonder, thought, anger, and stern resolve, until it seemed to his companion like a battlefield.

"He is a man of iron," thought Gilbert. "Nothing can alarm him, and I pity the man he hates if they war against each other openly. As for these Silver Scorpions—I wish I could see clearly, but it seems to me Giles knows more of them than he is willing to admit. They are terribly in earnest, and in their own minds there seems to be no doubt but what he is the right man. Did he really commit some crime in Mexico to justify them for thus hunting him?"

It was a hard question to answer, but strong man that he was, he had no desire to interrupt Giles Percival while he was in that mood.

The latter aroused after a long pause.

"Something must be done," he quietly said, "but for the life of me I do not see what. While the Silver Scorpions menaced me alone, I could afford to laugh at them, but it seems they now aim at Nida. This must be stopped. From to-night a guard shall at all times be kept on the house. Our herdsmen are Americans, and faithful. I will pay them well to guard the house. At the same time, I will spur on Buck Butler and his Rangers by offering a reward for every Scorpion killed."

"Would it not be safer for all of us to leave Texas?"

A defiant look crossed Percival's face.

"I don't run for any live man or combination thereof. I wish Nida and my father were safe, but low, skulking and secret as the Scorpions are in their way, I will fight them hand to hand."

"I am with you to the end, Giles."

They crossed hands then and there, the body of the Mexican lying beside them, and the sign of the mystic league resting on his breast. In itself, the agreement was all well enough, but it did not amount to much. It needed more than empty words to fight a foe who was unknown, who always struck silently and secretly, and who seemed to partake of devilish gifts.

The night passed away without events of importance. It was a momentous one in the life of Giles Percival. Unknown to his friend he was fighting a battle with himself. In his past he had committed a sin. But for that act his life would not then be hunted, the Silver Scorpions would not be at the door of Morton Percival's house.

Of himself Giles asked one question. If he should go away, should flee from Danby, would Nida and the elder Percival be free from further danger, or would the Scorpions still follow them? It seemed most likely that the last would be the case, and Giles resolved to remain and fight the battle out on the ground of his enemy's own selection.

Had he been sure that he would thus save his father and sister, he would have at once left Danby never to return.

Just before daybreak the young men carried out the body of the Mexican and deposited it at one side of the live-oaks, there to remain until they had seen Buck Butler.

Then they returned to the house and the whole household appeared at the breakfast-table as usual, the other members wholly ignorant of the night's tragedy.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MARIOT AND NIDA.

BEFORE mentioning what had occurred, Giles decided to see Buck Butler, so he saddled his horse and rode over to the cabin. The Ranger and his "cubs" were just finishing breakfast. A light conversation followed while Buck was finishing his meal, and then he took his guest some distance from the cabin, and they had a long talk.

His attempt to follow the Mexicans the previous night had been a failure. They had gone half a mile, and then, coming to horses which had been tied in a grove, they had mounted and rode swiftly away.

Buck followed some distance, but, becoming exhausted, had turned back and spent the night near Percival's.

Giles had a more interesting story to tell, and it threw Buck into a rage. He was wild to think that such things could occur in the locality where he ruled as sheriff and Judge Lynch in one, and he got no clew to the repeated mysteries.

No wonder the worthy Ranger was angry at having his professional ability so baffled.

A long talk ensued, but their way was not clear. They had already tried the plan of calling the rangers out in a body, with poor success, and to offer a prize for every Silver Scorpion killed would be going a little too far, since all deaths yet recorded had fallen on the Mexicans themselves.

Plainly, their only way was to oppose wit to wit and leave the result with the future. For instance, in the case of Paula, whom they suspected, they might have tried to frighten her into a confession, but they had no actual proof of her guilt and it was probable, judging from what they knew of her nature, that she would remain silent even under torture.

Buck and Giles returned to the cabin, and while the former was securing a fresh supply of ammunition, the latter talked with Joan and Jean.

All this was seen by the Ranger as he emerged from the cabin, but with a man's obtuseness, he failed to perceive that Joan was smiling on the young heir as she had never smiled on any other man.

Buck was blind, just then, but the time might yet come when his eyes would be opened. It was not reasonable to expect much in a case where a great gulf existed, as between Giles and Joan.

Money and social position are accountable for nine-tenths of the treachery of the world.

The two men rode over to Percival's. The body of Mexican was viewed, but, furnishing no clew, was buried in a lonely place.

Then Giles and Buck entered the house and the story of the night tragedy was told. The former made the first step in the narrative a peculiar one.

Paula was sitting by the table engaged in some needle-work, to which she had been called. Without a word of warning, Giles tossed the Scorpion talisman upon the table in such a way that it spun about, top-like, for a moment, and then became motionless directly in front of her.

Keen eyes were on the peon girl then. Giles, Buck and Gilbert were looking, and not a change of her expression would escape their notice.

She lifted her gaze from her work to the talisman, looked steadily at it for a moment and then calmly resumed her work. A little surprise and wonder had been visible on her face, but that was all. She had not given any guilty start, or showed a sign of alarm.

The experiment had failed.

Giles told of the dead man they had found in the house and spoke of the precautions he proposed to take for the future. At all hours the house would be guarded, and woe be to the man who should seek to enter.

"Not even one of you, ladies, will be permitted to go out," he added, grimly. "If you have lovers, you must meet them by day or marry and start house-keeping on your own premises."

Even this thrust failed to move Paula. She must clearly see that it would prevent further meetings with Ralph, the servant of Mariot, but she showed no regret.

Violette was less calm. Either she was really and thoroughly frightened, or else she was cleverly acting a part. Perhaps it was a little of each, for, though she seemed unnerved, she used a multitude of French expressions which, somehow, seemed affected.

Later in the day, Colonel Mariot called. He had not heard of the latest tragedies, and he hastened to interest all by saying that a man had been fixed upon as the one who aided the survivor of the counterfeit Indians to escape from prison; and that the culprit had narrowly escaped Judge Lynch.

As it was he had been pursued across the Rio Grande, and would not be likely to come again to Danby.

His news was cast into the shade by what the others had to tell, and, in turn, he grappled with the night's mystery but failed to solve it.

Later in the day, as Nida was passing through one of the unoccupied rooms of the house, she was accosted by Paula.

"Will you come to this window, senorita?" the peon girl asked, in her soft voice.

Nida went, and, looking out of the window, she saw a man and woman standing together beside the live-oaks. They were Roland Gilbert and Violette, and there was something decidedly lover-like in their manner.

Mademoiselle's hand was on his arm and she, at least, was talking earnestly.

Nida turned calmly away and looked again at Paula.

"What of it?" she asked.

"Nothing, perhaps, senorita, but you will pardon me if I say I fear it means something?"

Paula looked down at the floor, her face as meek as a Madonna's.

"Well, what does it mean?" Nida good-naturedly asked.

"Ah! I have seen them together so much, senorita. They talk, talk, always, when alone. Do they forget, or—"

"Speak plainly, Paula; I do not admire mystery. Let me know all you suspect."

"Mr. Gilbert is a gentleman, senorita, but we are all human. I have seen him smile on you and then on mademoiselle. I am for the time acting as her

maid, but you are my real mistress. I love you for your kindness, and—and I thought you might want to see yonder scene."

Nida glanced from the window again. Violette and Gilbert stood as before, her hand upon his arm, but Nida only smiled.

"In plain words, you think I ought to be jealous, Paula. I am not, and we will drop the subject."

"You are not offended, senorita?" and the peon girl suddenly raised her eyes, in evident alarm.

"Not in the least. I know your devotion, Paula, but we will not speak of the matter again."

And Miss Percival went serenely on her way, leaving Paula alone.

The latter gazed after her with an expression on her face very different from the meek one of a minute before.

Her dark eyes sparkled, her lips parted in a curious look, which was half a smile and half a scowl, and in the flesh of her hands her finger-nails worked nervously.

If ever a woman's face expressed hatred and menace, Paula's then did; but she spoke no word, the storm soon passed, and she went about her work as meekly as ever.

Meanwhile Nida, going to the sitting-room, had encountered Colonel Mariot. He had come in a little before, and was sitting alone.

His face brightened wonderfully at sight of her, and after handing her a chair, with marked politeness, he launched into a conversation which gave her little time to think or even make reply to what he said.

Nida did not admire the retired hero. She knew enough about physiognomy to believe that there was something secret and evil in his face.

She could not exactly tell what she read there. His half-smile was not open and manly, but whether small sins or great ones lurked behind it she could not tell.

As a neighbor, she had tolerated him; as such she now kept her place when she longed to break away. She watched the door hoping to see some other member of the family appear, but none came.

Colonel Mariot gradually wound around to the late tragedies in and about the house. He expressed himself as alarmed at the danger she was daring by remaining in the vicinity, and advised her to go to Galveston, New Orleans, or some other place for a time.

Nida did not laugh at his words—for it would have been folly to disregard the fact that she was in danger—but she had considerable of Giles Percival's own brave nature, and she firmly said that she should not run away.

"Good Heavens! will you be so rash?" the colonel said, in seeming horror. "Miss Percival, for my sake—pardon me, but I mean it—do not remain in this house. If you are resolved to stay near Danby, come to my own home. It is always open to you—nay, it would make me happy to have you there. Tell me, will you come?"

He was speaking with vehemence, and Nida shrank back from the light that blazed in his ambushed eyes.

"Why, Colonel Mariot—" she began, falteringly.

"Understand me, Nida, when I say I am forced to this step by your own peril. I have long thought of asking you one question, but not so soon. Tell me, Nida, if I am hasty, when I say that I would be glad to take you to that home as my wife! Will you come to the love and the protection I can give you?"

If Mariot had not been blind he would have read his fate in her face. Actual terror was expressed there, and this was no wonder.

The colonel looked like a maniac. He spoke rapidly and fiercely, his voice unusually harsh, and while his lips curled back in an attempt at a smile, no such look came to his peculiar face. It was perfectly blank except for the wolfish look about the mouth and a wild, eager desire blazing from his eyes.

His appearance was not that of a sane man.

Nida trembled and faltered before him. What she said she never afterward knew, but in some way she managed to let him know that she desired neither his love nor his protection.

It was kindly done, and the effect was very satisfactory. The colonel swallowed twice, pulled his mustache vigorously, and finally settled into his usual composure.

He had found his Waterloo, but he knew how to meet it.

By the time Giles and his father came in, both Mariot and Nida had recovered their self-possession, and even Giles did not suspect that any cloud had crossed their sky that day.

Gilbert and Mademoiselle Aubry soon joined the circle, and then all tried to summon a measure of light-heartedness and to forget for the time the dark shadow of the household.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MARIOT'S MASTER.

COLONEL MARIOT rode home alone just before dark, and from the vicious way in which he ever and anon tugged at the rein of his horse, it was evident he was not in a happy mood.

Why should he be? He had laid his heart and hand before Nida Percival only to be rejected, and as men seldom propose unless they wish to be accepted, it was natural he should feel disturbed at the result.

More than that, he could plainly see that his star was waning at Percival's. Giles treated him with undisguised coldness, and the elder Percival no longer button-holed him to ask his opinion on agricultural and kindred subjects.

In all these things, the colonel saw evidence of his coming decapitation as a friend and family counselor.

Moreover, he believed he knew just where to place the blame. Matters had been different before the coming of Roland Gilbert. Then, Nida was polite and kind, Giles courteous, and Mr. Percival untiring in his zeal to acquire knowledge of the soil and things that were above it.

Now all the family shunned him, violence and murder had broken loose around Danby, men came and went strangely, and the spirit of devastation seemed to have been let loose.

And the colonel held Gilbert blamable for all this mischief. He had won Nida's love, turned the heads of Giles and his father, and thus killed all of his (Mariot's) hopes in their infancy.

"By Jupiter! off the scene goes Mr. Gilbert, or I am a fool. I'll put him out of the way and then renew my suit. But how can I dispose of him? If I set the Scorpions on his track and he should disappear, it would be just like Nida to wait ten years for his return. Women are so infernal stubborn."

The colonel struck his horse a vicious blow, though the animal was behaving very well.

"Violette is a failure, and I wish she was back at New Orleans. She can't fascinate Gilbert any more than she could a statue of Davy Crockett. I'll pack her off home again. Wait! I have an idea. I'll have her tell a little lie for me. She and Gilbert must have trouble, and I must appear as her champion. We will quarrel and fight, and I'll kill him. After that, Nida will fly to my arms—aha! the idea is excellent, and I'll win after all."

The colonel reached his home in a somewhat happier mood. It was past twilight, and as he rode up, he knew by the light gleaming from a front window that he had a caller.

One of his servants met him near the door.

"You have company, colonel."

"So I see; I'll go in."

He did not think to ask who it was; but, walking lightly up the stairs, he entered the front room at once.

A light stood on the table, and near at hand, a man was sitting in a chair and looking at him closely.

Mariot closed the door, called his half-smile to his face, and then paused suddenly.

"You here!" he ejaculated.

"Yes. Sit down, senor."

The visitor kicked a chair toward his host, but made no motion toward arising or extending his hand. Evidently he did not expect or crave a warm reception.

His face, too, remained calm almost to coldness. For some reason, he had no smiles for Mariot. His face was a better one than his companion's, strong, firm, manly and tolerably frank; yet he looked like one who would make a bad enemy and, if occasion demanded, use any power he might hold without mercy.

Mariot sat down. He looked disturbed and uneasy; yet, at the same time, defiant. If appearances spoke plainly, he would have been glad to kick his caller out of doors—but dared not.

"You are surprised to see me, senor," continued the unknown.

"Yes," said Mariot, surlily.

"And yet you have seen me once before in Texas."

"When?"

"It was I whom you met under the shadow of the trees by the Danby road."

"Ha!"

"Yes. You see, senor, fate has once more brought us together. We have both changed since the old days. We are older, richer, perhaps wiser. Five years ago we stood together before the altar and swore—"

"Enough!" said Mariot, hastily. "I know what we swore; don't tell it to the four winds. But, Costello, those days are past. I have ceased to be a member of the—of the society, and have settled down in Texas to a life of peace."

"Death only can end my membership, or yours. Once you have taken the oath, the Scorpion Brothers can always call on you for aid. You dare not refuse their demand now. Once a Scorpion, always one."

Costello, as the man had been called, spoke with somber energy. Mariot looked fearfully around and then angrily at his companion.

"I tell you, do not speak that word here. I will not have it. The name is under a ban in Texas. As for my still being a member, I have been three years away from the society, and I think that makes me exempt. Besides, I am a Frenchman."

"The last argument only possesses any reason. I grant you a little rope on the strength of that. Still, you dare not refuse a call of the league, for you have sworn. Since that day the Silver Scorpions have waxed strong. The sign of the order has been worn all over Mexico. Peon and patrician have alike taken the oath."

"Is there hope of success?" Mariot asked, like a man who feels called upon to say something.

"We must succeed!" was the deep reply. "Too much is at stake for us to think of failure. But for the act of a traitor our end would before now have been accomplished; but that traitor shall pay the debt with his life. We have followed him for many miles and the end is near. You know whom I mean."

"Giles Percival?"

"Yes."

"Why the devil don't you make way with him?" Mariot surlily asked.

"There have been various reasons. When he fled from Mexico after his great crime we were at first at fault to know just where he had gone. One of our men finally struck his trail and followed him across the line to Arizona. He found him at a mining town with his friend, Roland Gilbert."

"Yes; the dog is always around."

"It had been ordered that Percival should be captured and brought to Mexico for punishment, but our man was too zealous, and tried to take justice into his own hands. In doing this he somehow made a mistake, and tried to kill Gilbert instead of Percival. It was just as well, however, for Gilbert got the best of the fight and killed the Scorpion."

"Worse than that, the sign of the League fell into Gilbert's hands, and he brought it to Texas. He was, however, followed. Friends of our dead brother removed his body to a holier sepulcher, and then they started after his assassin."

"One night, when Gilbert slept, they entered his room by means of a ladder and the window, and regained the talisman. They might have killed the American then, but they were merciful."

"You know all about the tragedy which occurred in the wood when you went on your jaguar-hunt—at least, as much as I do. I am not sorry our man was killed there, for he was about to shoot Percival against orders, but I would give a gold mine to know who murdered our brother Scorpion."

"I haven't the slightest idea, but you ought to give

me credit for what I then did. I got Gilbert out of sight, and pocketed the dead man's talisman."

"You did well. Have you any idea who marked the scorpion figure on the tree?"

"Not the least."

"We have often been baffled," said Costello, gloomily. "The most mysterious affair of all was in the chaparral. I had Percival securely, and thought I was burning him up, but some one rescued him in a very neat fashion. Even Percival does not know who."

"I had a mysterious case the other day," said Mariot, growing confidential. "Hired three fellows to play outlaw, and get up a scene wherein I could act hero. Unluckily, Gilbert and Buck Butler showed up and shot two of the three. I gave a note, which would put all the blame on Gilbert, to one of my men, and had him put it on the body of one of the dead. I know he did it, but that note has never been found."

"I know your little game, Mariot, and it was to join forces with you that I to-night came here."

"What do you mean?"

"You want to kill Gilbert and marry Nida Percival, and you would not be sorry to see the male Percivals drop off like ripe fruit."

"Well?"

"I want to kill Giles Percival."

"Haven't you men enough to do it?"

"The devil or some other power protects the man. Of course, Buck Butler and his men are the worst obstacles, for I could otherwise march into the country and kill right and left; but when I get in my secret blows, Giles Percival somehow escapes them."

"What was your man doing in their house last night?" asked Mariot, looking keenly at Costello—or "El Tigre," as we now know him to be.

"What man?" and the Scorpion chief seemed really surprised.

"Can't give his name, but he got his last hunt."

"Explain," said El Tigre, frowning.

Mariot told of the man who had died in front of Nida's door, and the chief's face grew darker still.

"I knew the man was missing. So that was his fate! Well, so be it. He disobeyed orders, or he would not have been in the house as he was. So Percival claims he does not know who killed him? He lies; I see his hand in this."

"I doubt it."

"Never mind. Are you with me in a war against the Percivals?"

"Why not each one of us work for himself?"

"I prefer it otherwise," said El Tigre.

A gleam of rebellion shot into Mariot's eyes.

"Have I no voice in the matter?" he demanded.

"None," answered the chief, coldly. "The League of the Scorpion Brothers holds you body and soul, and if you try to evade their requests they will enforce their wishes by the knife. How is it, Mariot, are you with me?"

"Yes," the colonel sullenly answered.

"Then hear my plan."

CHAPTER XXIX.

A STRANGE GUIDE.

THE hour was late when El Tigre left Mariot's house; but he went well satisfied, for a plan had been laid which pleased him well.

The active crusade of Buck Butler and his rough riders had compelled the Scorpion chief to send most of his men beyond the Rio Grande, and, even if he had desired a wholesale slaughter, he had not enough to make a bold attack on Percival's house.

Buck had posted his men here and there, and every Mexican was so closely watched that the rangers would quickly gather at the first suspicious sign.

El Tigre, however, was through with trifling. He had sworn to have the blood of Giles Percival, and he meant to keep the vow, while the delay in the case had already been too great.

The way of the Scorpion chief lay through the wood which served as an outskirt of South Forest, and along the road he galloped at moderate speed. Really his horse was choosing his own pace, for El Tigre was deep in thought and giving little heed to his surroundings.

He was like a good many other men. He had all the inclinations and ambitions of a soldier, but in the midst of his crusade against Giles Percival he had seen Nida and fallen in love with her pretty face.

He had not spoken truthfully to Mariot about the man who died in front of Nida's door. He had sent him, together with several other Scorpions, to abduct her.

The man in question was the leader of the party. He sent the other men to the live-oaks to await his return from a scout to the house. It was expected that the door would be opened from the inside by an ally, but not until the whole band applied for admission.

How these men waited in vain for their companion to rejoin them, the reader has seen, for they were the same observed by Giles and Buck; but El Tigre could only surmise that the deceased had seen some way of entering unaided and had then tried to bring Nida out alone.

He paid for his rashness with his life, but one question was still unanswered—who had killed him? It was not upon this subject, but as to how he should secure Nida for his own, that El Tigre was thinking as he galloped along the road. He had promised her to Mariot, but he did not intend to keep the pledge.

He was in the midst of his treacherous plotting when he was rudely interrupted.

Out from the bushes which fringed the road came a sheet of fire, and as a bullet sped past in close proximity to the rider's head, the sharp crack of a rifle burst upon the air.

El Tigre was quick-witted and keen-eyed, and as the flames lighted the bushes he, realizing that the would-be assassin had missed his aim, tried to distinguish his face, but saw only the barrel of the rifle.

Another moment, and his fiery horse went forward with a tremendous bound, almost unseating him, and when he would have held him in he found the animal gave no heed to the bit.

Thoughts of revenge had been in the Scorpion's mind, but as he was thus carried away he abandoned the idea and let his horse have the rein.

The animal soon exhausted its fury and relapsed

into his former pace, but the shooting had materially changed El Tigre's plans. He had thought to enter the wood near that spot, but, brave as he was, he had no desire to again invite the rifle of the unknown.

Turning from the road at what he thought a proper place, he set off across the open field, laying his plans to strike South Forest on the eastern side.

Half the distance had been passed when he heard voices and laughter proceeding from a *motte* a little in advance.

He paused and listened, but, receiving good evidence that the unseen men were Mexicans, cautiously advanced to the edge of the trees.

There he left his horse and crept forward on foot.

He soon found that all this caution was not necessary, for, getting nearer, he recognized his own men; but he could not understand why they were in such a jovial mood until he made out that a stranger was in their midst.

He strode abruptly forward.

"What means all this noise?" he sternly asked.

The men grew suddenly quiet. One of them removed his hat, and respectfully said:

"We have a stranger here who seems to be a maniac, señor."

"Let me look at him."

He pressed forward and tried to penetrate the night with his gaze. He saw a most strange-looking man, if man he was, for little was to be seen except a mass of grass and weeds from which arose a long, crooked staff.

El Tigre, however, was not at fault.

"*Caramba!*" he exclaimed, "so we meet again, you scoundrel. You are the man who hit me over the head near Buck Butler's cabin, and I see you still carry the same staff."

"Do poor Tom some charity!" said the creature, putting out his hand without any show of bashfulness. "Remember those who have been accursed by the foul fiend, who have roved for many years over plains strewn with serpent's teeth and mountains made of knives!"

"Who are you?" demanded El Tigre, impressed by the deep, hoarse and solemn utterance of the man.

"My name is Tom, and there are those who call me the Mad Rover of the Prairie. Others call me Half-witted Tom, but them will I confound. May bread turn to stone before their touch, lakes to burning deserts, and gold to merest brass. May vipers suck their blood when they sleep, deadly serpents drop poison in their cups, and the foul fiend seize them when they die."

"Where do you live?"

"Where others die! Ask the chain-lightning where sleeps the thunder. But why do you talk folly to Poor Tom? 'Get thee to thy cold bed and warm thee.'"

"Are you acquainted in South Forest?" the chief more earnestly asked.

"Do I know the toes on my feet? What I do not know I never tell. My wit is another man's folly. What do you want?"

"Do you know of a hill in the chaparral where all the trees are large and straight? 'Tis the only one of the kind in South Forest."

"I know nothing. Tom's a fool. Yet, come here—now! Listen!"

The Rover had caught the Mexican by the arm, and drawn him closer. His hold was crushing, and El Tigre felt inclined to break away, but finally held his ground.

Tom chuckled in his face.

"Men say I am a fool, but when they say it they only use the wit that I have thrown away. All men are fools by birth, and few outgrow it. You—you—are you listening?"

"Yes," said El Tigre.

"Then look!"

The Rover bent low and pointed with his staff toward South Forest.

"Our way is there—let us go. Keep your battle-axes ready, for the Saracens cover the ground like locusts. Wear your boots on your hands and your ears on your feet. Spare none and run only when the foe is whipped. Come!"

The Rover showed an inclination to move on and, absurd though it might be, the Scorpion chief resolved to follow his lead. Perhaps, despite the chaotic state of his mind he would lead them direct, and it was probable he knew far more of the chaparral than they.

Directing two of his men to keep near the maniac, idiot, or whatever he was, and see that he did not escape, the chief went back and secured his horse and the journey was commenced.

Mad Tom kept near the van, apparently unconscious of the fact that he was a practical prisoner. He plodded along clumsily, using his staff at every step and muttering of the 'foul fiend,' of the rivers, lakes, mountains and deserts.

His ornaments of straw fluttered in the wind and attracted undue notice from the Mexicans. They began to slyly steal it, wisp by wisp, but ceased at El Tigre's command.

South Forest was soon reached and Half-witted Tom unhesitatingly entered. Once, El Tigre stopped and questioned him, but his answers were wild and incoherent, and he was allowed to go on as he wished.

The way was rough and the bushes thick and covered with thorns, but the guide did not once pause and the others followed where he led. The chief was obliged to leave his horse, however.

At last the eyes of the Scorpions were gladdened by a sight of the knoll they sought. They had been there before, but they had not yet learned the ways of the chaparral well enough to find it by night.

The Rover, however, had done his work well, and the tired men threw themselves down on the ground.

It had occurred to El Tigre that his guide might not be so big a fool as he had at first seemed. He had led the way so well that it seemed impossible he could be weak of mind.

The chief looked about for him, but he was not visible. He called his name and he did not answer. He searched for him and he was not to be found.

The eccentric being had seized the first opportunity after reaching the knoll to escape from his companions.

CHAPTER XXX.

AT MIDNIGHT.

THE following morning showed no change in the situation at Percival's. The night had passed without an alarm. Giles had gained some sleep during the previous day and, with a stout herdsman, kept awake all night, while Buck Butler and some of his Rangers guarded the outside.

All was quiet through the day. Gilbert had charge of the necessary precautions, and Giles slept in the afternoon.

Mr. Percival rode over to Danby to confer with the justice of the court, but, as that individual had never been known to do anything except to put on trial such prisoners as Buck brought in, nothing came of the visit except an exchange of opinions and a friendly smoke.

The master of the ranch rode homeward more than ever convinced that Buck Butler was the law and gospel of the Danby section, and the biggest man along the Rio Grande.

One person inside of Percival's house was conscious of being under surveillance. This person was Paula. She moved about her work in her usual quiet way, her eyes downcast and her face meek, but she was not by any means blind.

At times it was Nida who watched her, then Gilbert was in the habit of suddenly appearing; and, when she was free from both of them, a gay young herdsman, who had been stationed inside, would follow her about, talk of her pretty face and her dusky eyes and otherwise compliment her, or laugh at the idea of danger from a mysterious source.

Paula listened, smiled gravely now and then, but showed little inclination to flirt and less to say anything unguarded.

While they watched she reflected. She had been directed to perform a certain work that evening, and no religious enthusiast was ever more anxious to obey than she.

Even with the chances against her she made the attempt. She brought a dipper of water to Nida to aid in the cooking. Then she was sent on another errand; Gilbert changed the water she had brought for another quantity just like it, and, as she came back, carried the original dipper-full to his room.

That part had been a trap for Paula. She had been given time and a chance to use a drug on them if she was so inclined.

Once in his room, he looked at the water carefully. It had no unusual appearance, and he set it aside for future examination.

Paula believed she saw the water she had brought go into the food, and then she breathed more freely. She had fallen into the trap; the water had been drugged; but, by the precautions suggested by Giles, all danger had been averted.

Woe be to the peon girl if once Giles obtained proof of her treachery. Quiet as he was in his way, he was a lion when aroused, and could be as remorseless as the Silver Scorpions themselves.

Just before dark Giles consulted with Buck Butler. The Ranger proposed to remain in the live-oak grove all night, and three of his men had positions on other sides of the house.

The place certainly seemed safe from attack.

While they were talking Violette went to Paula.

"Was anything wrong with the water you brought to Nida?" she abruptly asked, looking at the girl sharply.

For an instant the face of the peon was disturbed and her eyes rolled from side to side as though she sought to escape questioning. Then they were raised to those of her mistress—steady, meek and innocent of appearance.

"I do not understand," she softly said.

"You brought water to Nida for cooking purposes. Roland Gilbert changed it for other water, and that brought by you is in his room awaiting examination. If anything is wrong with it, you had better manage to tip it over somehow."

"Nothing is wrong so far as I know," and the dark eyes were as steady as ever.

Violette looked angry.

"There is something concealed from me," she said. "You and Mariot are playing a game of which I know nothing, and I am tired of being your cat's-paw. Either you speak plainly to me or I tell what I know to Giles Percival."

"Say this to Colonel Mariot if to any one, lady. He will deal justly with you. Are you not both of French blood? Monsieur the colonel will not forget his countrywoman."

Paula murmured as softly as a purring cat, and her face looked angelic, but Violette was not deceived. She, too, was a woman, and she had before that day played the angel herself. She had observed Paula closely enough to know that her nature was naturally vivacious, and in this soft-spoken creature she saw only a cunning woman.

"Have your own way, but I'll tell you one thing, that water, which Roland Gilbert suspected, is now in my possession. I have tried the exchange plan, and as I know something of chemical work myself, I mean to analyze it to-morrow."

"And I do not know what you mean, my mistress," said Paula, in evident sorrow.

"You are a fool!" exclaimed mademoiselle, as she turned away.

Although she had spoken falsely when she said she knew something of chemistry, she had spoken the truth when she said she had exchanged the water; and thus it was that when Giles came to test what she had left in its place, he found nothing wrong.

Violette was not happy. It was plain to her that many secrets were abroad in which she was not permitted to share. Colonel Mariot and Paula had one and they kept it close, while the people at Percival's had at least one more.

Violette was not trusted, and the fact disturbed her—not because she claimed to be worthy of confidence, but because she had a good deal of curiosity, and wanted to revel in mystery and horror if any was abroad.

The changing of the water had been done chiefly to spite Roland Gilbert, and it had worked to a charm.

At the usual hour the lights were extinguished in the house. All except Giles and one herdsman, whose name was Eager, had retired as usual; but they were on guard with their weapons in their hands, and not inclined to sleep at their posts.

Outside, the Rangers held their places, and the

house seemed well protected from enemies of an ordinary nature.

Yet Buck Butler experienced a surprise about midnight. At that time, all being quiet about the premises, he left the live-oaks and started for the post of his nearest follower.

As he neared the spot he signaled, but there was no answer. He paused and repeated the light call, but still silence reigned all along the prairie.

That anything had befallen the Ranger he did not suspect, and with an impatient exclamation he pushed further forward.

"Durnation!" he suddenly said, "whar kin ther critter be? I tole him not ter stir from hyer unless—Hullo! what was that?"

Some sort of a noise had arisen from the grass not far away—a muffled sound which seemed partly like a groan—and Buck promptly drew his revolver.

"Who is thar?" he demanded.

The sound was repeated.

Buck hesitated for a moment. His first suspicion was that some enemy was trying to draw him into an ambush, but as another and more startling theory struck him, he strode quickly to the suspicious spot.

What he saw needed no interpretation. Prostrate on the ground, half concealed by the prairie grass, lay a human form, and it needed but one glance for Buck to recognize his follower.

The man's gaze was raised to his own, and another moan broke from his lips.

"Fur God's sake, what is ther matter?" demanded Butler, as he sunk upon his knees beside his friend.

"I've got my last hunt—my last hunt!" gasped Abe Harris. "I'm a dyin' man, Buck."

There was little room to doubt him. Butler's hand, as it was laid on Abe's breast, encountered something wet and warm, and he knew it was his follower's life-blood.

"How did et happen, Abe?" he grated through his teeth.

"I've gone on my last trail," muttered Harris, faintly.

"It shall be life for life. Tell me how it happened, Abe."

"Ther river is nigh, an' on ther other side—"

"Abe! Abe! wake up!" cried Buck, shaking him by the shoulder. "Don't go off without tellin' who did it. Arouse, man, an' tell me who hit you."

His energy recalled the wandering senses of the dying Ranger. He was indeed near the dark river, and his hold on life was so small that his mind was already drifting away.

The shout and the grasp on his shoulder aroused him. With a great effort he raised himself on his elbow, assisted by Buck, and excitement gave him fictitious strength of speech.

"They crept enter me through ther grass like snakes," he said, "an' then they flung ther lasso an' brought me down. I see'd 'em as they stood on my breast an' strangled me, but they was six ag'in' one an' I lost my grip on life. When I waked up they had cut me in pieces with their knives, an'—an'—I'm a dyin' man!"

"Their names: their names!" almost shouted Buck.

"They was strangers—Mexicans! I didn't know 'em, but I fear—I fear—Buck, ter ther house!"

With the last word the muscles of the Ranger relaxed and he hung a dead weight on Butler's arm. He laid him gently on the ground and then sat looking gloomily down on what he knew was the face of a dead man.

Abe Harris was done with life.

"I'll have revenge," said Buck, huskily; "I will fur sure. You was a true man, Abe, an' I never forget sech. But who shall I strike? He said they was Mexicans an' that he feared—"

He paused abruptly and looked toward Percival's. What he saw there was enough to bring him suddenly to his feet.

A bright light was showing all around the house, a pillar of the same kind was arising above the roof, and from every window red tongues of flame were creeping out and lapping the wood-work that surrounded them.

"My God! ther house is on fire—ther Scorpions are thar!" cried Buck, hoarsely.

He wasted no more time. Leaving his friend where he had fallen, Buck grasped his rifle tightly and ran at full speed toward the scene of the fire.

That it was something more than that was proved by the sound of two or three revolvers which spoke dully as he ran, but he did not reach the spot to take part in the fight.

Half-way on his journey some heavy weight seemed to fall on his head, and then he dropped to the ground and lay motionless for long minutes.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AFTER THE TRAGEDY.

WHEN Buck Butler awoke from his insensibility it was with a dull pain in his head, the effects of the blow he had received, but he had experienced such trifles before, and he at once sprung to his feet with his head clear and cool.

His strength remained as usual, and he knew he had not received any serious injury.

He directed his gaze toward Percival's house, and then stood with changing color at what he saw.

The house no longer stood as of old. Wall, roof and chimney had disappeared, and in place of the house he saw only a mass of red and blazing coals and fagots. The fire fiend had destroyed the greater part of the food at his command, but some of the larger timbers yet remained in part, and flame and smoke were arising from the ruin.

Not a person was visible.

Reckless of the danger he might invite, Buck dashed forward at full speed. Though the chances were against it, he might do something for his friends.

The faint hope vanished after he had made the circuit of the ruin. No living thing could be within that mass of coals, and so far as the light shone on the prairie the vicinity was untenanted except by himself.

"Are they all gone?" muttered the Ranger. "Ain't thar one left ter tell me how they fit an' whar I must strike fur vengeance?"

He went nearer to the ruin and saw something which was like a human arm projecting from the burning mass, but it was already burnt beyond shape, and he must encounter the fire to reach it.

"Gone! all gone!" muttered the Ranger, with a groan.

Then he thought of the live-oaks, and turned his face toward the grove. There might be some one there, still alive, and hiding from the destroyers.

Acting on this faint hope, he picked a brand from the fire and strode toward the trees. In places, the nearest of these showed leaves yellowed by the heat, but otherwise they were as peaceful as before the days when the Silver Scorpions invaded Texas.

Buck went about his search systematically. He looked beneath each tree, but found no one. Then he called the names of his several friends, but no one answered.

Evidently the destroyers had made a clean sweep.

"I'll go ter Danby an' rouse up ther hull country," said Buck, suddenly.

He was standing under one of the trees, and as he spoke he brushed aside the drooping branches and started out, but he suddenly paused as he stumbled and nearly fell over some object on the ground.

He held his torch lower and saw what seemed to be the body of a man, and a second look revealed the face of Roland Gilbert. Its whiteness seemed to destroy the last hope that he still lived, but Buck dragged him into the light, tore open his garments, and placed his hand over his breast.

There was still warmth there, and the heart beat steadily.

The Ranger looked for the cause of his condition. No wound was to be found, and he was for awhile puzzled, but anon he found a bluish line around his neck.

It was the track of the lasso.

"Ther Greasers ag'in, cuss 'em!" uttered the Ranger, hotly. "They tried ter sarve ther young feller as they did Abe Harris; but I'll hev' him around in a jiffy."

He ran to the neighboring spring, brought water and dashed it in the face of the unconscious man. Other work followed, for Buck had acted surgeon at times for many years, off and on, and he was no novice.

Under his ministrations Gilbert soon rallied, stirred, muttered brokenly, and then opened his eyes.

For a little while his mind was dazed, but sense and remembrance soon came back.

"What has happened, boyee?" Buck demanded.

Gilbert turned around to look toward where the house had stood, and then groaned at what he saw and buried his face in his hands.

Anon he grew calmer under Buck's persuasive words and spoke coherently, though in a manner like one who has just given up all hope.

"Our precautions were in vain. The fiends have triumphed. The Silver Scorpions have had their revenge."

"Was it them?" Buck demanded.

"I think it was; I don't know. Where are the Percivals? Are all dead but us?"

"I can't find anybody 'cept you an' me. Tell me what has happened."

"Little I know about it. I went to sleep in my chamber, and awoke with a sense of suffocation. The room was full of smoke, and a bright light glared around. I bounded from the bed, but at that moment my door was burst in and three or four men entered, bearing in their hands knives that were dripping with blood."

"Go on!" said Buck, hoarsely.

"One glance showed me that they were Mexicans, and then, as they rushed toward me with fierce cries, I caught up my revolver and shot the foremost. He fell, and I caught his knife while it was in the air and sprung back to where they could only get at me in front."

"I hardly know what followed. The air was thick with smoke and almost stifled me. The heat began to be intense, and I thought the floor shook under our feet. Well, the whole gang rushed upon me, and then I know I fired another shot and struck out blindly with the knife."

"They came down on me in a body, however; I was knocked against the window; and then out and through it I went like a rock. I struck the ground with a crash, but, fortunately, without receiving an injury."

"I gained my feet and looked about me. From top to bottom the house was wrapped in flames, but not a human being was near me. I remember that I shouted your name, scarcely knowing what I did, and then started to re-enter the house."

"At that moment the door was dashed open and several men appeared, all staggering as though nearly stifled by the smoke. Close behind them followed others, and with these devils came Nida, Violette, and Paula. All were prisoners, or seemed to be, and I saw Nida vainly strive to free her hands from the grasp of a stout wretch."

"The sight was too much for me, and I rushed after them, regardless of the fact that I did not possess a weapon. I believe I was mad then, and I would have sprung at them with my bare hands."

"When near this spot I felt something fall upon my shoulders and tighten around my neck. It was like the fold of a snake, but I recognized the touch of a lasso. Then came a sensation as though my head was plucked from my body, and I knew no more until you brought me back to consciousness."

Gilbert had told his story in a manner more graphic than calm. The horror of the night was still upon him, as was shown by his speech and gestures, but Buck could not wonder at it. Matters had been explained as clearly as he had dared to hope. To all appearances, the three girls had been taken away alive, and all the men except Gilbert had been killed.

He went out on the prairie and found that his other two Rangers had been killed in about the same manner as Abe Harris, and he suspected that if he had not left his own post to visit Abe's, at the beginning of the trouble, he might have shared the same fate.

"It has been ther blackest night I've see'd fur many a year," he said, between his teeth. "Three o' my Rangers gone, an' likely, both t'other Percivals an' ther men. Ef I had my hands on Giles now, I'd make him tell why these men hev' hated

him. What did he do in Mexico? I kin sw'ar it was no ord'nary crime, for these men hev' trailed him through everything. Wal, ther result can be see'd!"

Buck strode back to Gilbert's side.

"Will you stay hyer while I go ter Danby an' arouse the Rangers?" he asked.

"Yes, yes; go for Heaven's sake."

"Take this revolver; you may need a weapon. Stay hyer till I come back an' then we'll go on a trail o' vengeance together. Don't get impatient, fur I must go at least ter Mariot's on foot. Wait fur me an' I'll give ye ther satisfaction you want."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE CHAPARRAL TRAIL.

GILBERT scarcely understood what Buck was saying. He heard him talking and knew that he was going for aid, but all else in the young man's mind fell into nothingness before one fact—Nida was gone, was in the hands of a deadly and dangerous enemy.

Only a few hours had passed since she promised to become his wife at no distant day, and to the average man that period of his life is the most pleasant of all from the cradle to the grave. Gilbert had indulged in day-dreams, in hopes and plans for the future—and this was the end.

Buck went away, but still the younger man sat with drooping head and listless air.

Half an hour passed. Then a hand was laid on his shoulder and he sprung to his feet like one suddenly galvanized.

Before him stood a well remembered figure, but one scarcely calculated to inspire him with hope or pleasure. It was Mad Tom, with his rags, his straw and his crooked staff who had interrupted him.

The Rover chuckled and pointed one quivering hand toward the ruin.

"Ha! ho! what a goodly sight for sightless eyes. How the red flame laps the tender wood and drives back the night. Ho! ho! the foul fiend rides on a steed of air and his breath is the bitter north'."

"Tom, do you know anything of this affair? Did you see the fire or the men who caused it?"

"Did I? Let me show you. Come with me."

He went a few paces away and then, parting the grass, revealed the body of a man. One glance showed Gilbert how he had died, for his head was crushed at the top, but his wandering gaze became arrested as Mad Tom lifted some object from the dead man's breast and held it toward his companion.

"By heaven!" said Gilbert, "it is as I thought—'tis the sign of the Scorpion Brothers. What do you know of this man?"

"I know he would have strangled you had not Mad Tom appeared. Fool that I am, I crushed his head with my staff and then dragged you to the cover of the live-oak. I could do no more then, so I watched the fire, the men and the women."

"Did you see the women?" Gilbert eagerly asked, catching the Rover's arm.

"Ay, that I did. Trust me for that. I saw the girls—there were three of them—and the Greasers took them away to the chaparral."

"Can you lead me to that place?"

"There, or anywhere else. Would you find your bird? Then come with me. Two heads are better than one, if mine is but a blockhead. What you do not know I will find out. Come!"

The Rover wheeled abruptly and Gilbert followed regardless of the fact that his only weapon was a revolver. A little beyond the ruin, however, they came upon the body of one of the Rangers, and as the guide paused to look at the remains Gilbert saw that a rifle lay near at hand.

He helped himself to a full supply of weapons and ammunition, spoke to Tom, and they resumed their way.

Gilbert asked some questions in regard to Nida and her captors, but the answers were vague and unsatisfactory, and the Rover did not seem inclined to talk. He was quieter than usual, and strode toward the South Forest steadily.

As they neared the place, Roland could not but ask himself if he was doing wisely to follow the Rover so unhesitatingly. People had never given the man credit for ability to think coherently, and he could not, or would not, talk in a straightforward fashion.

Was it possible that he possessed wit enough to act the part assigned him?

"Where do you expect to find them, Tom?" he asked, resolved to test the man.

"Where they are, unless they leave before we arrive," was the curt reply.

"Where is that?"

"We shall know when we find them."

"Are you sure you can find them, Tom?"

"Trust the fool for that. Poor Tom knows the chaparral as the buzzard knows its nest. Where the foul fiend goes, I can follow."

"Tom, who and what are you?"

"Only Tom the Rover. Some call me Mad Tom, but what do I care? The fool is happier than the king."

Gilbert asked another question, but it was disregarded, and the Rover went forward with long strides. The forest was reached and entered, and then, in utter darkness, they went on where bushes flapped in their faces and unseen logs caught their unwary toes.

Doubts and misgivings began to assail Gilbert. Surely, no good could come of this expedition, and it would be a wonder if the result was not unpleasant, to say the least. The chaparral was large enough to bewilder a stranger, and the deadly jaguar walked its unbeaten ways.

At the same time, there was something about Mad Tom which impressed him strongly. His words were wild and vague, but from the first, he had held perseveringly to one course, and his manner was earnest.

"I'll follow and see the result," said the young man to himself.

At that moment he tripped and fell over a log, but, arising, followed patiently after his guide.

For a mile their way was tolerably open, but soon after passing the scene of Mariot's jaguar hunt, the bushes grew thicker and their passage more difficult. More than once, sharp thorns caught their

garments or lacerated their flesh, but the guide seemed to care nothing for this, and Gilbert tried to imitate his stoicism.

At times the cries of wild beasts sounded so near as to startle him, and in such cases he frequently asked himself if he was not acting foolishly.

At last he stopped short and leaned against a tree.

"Stop!" he said. "I can go no further."

"Sick?" asked Tom, tersely.

"No, but I am tired out. I had a hard pull to-night before I saw you, and this infernal tramp has finished the work. My strength is all gone."

"Girl over there," said the Rover, abruptly.

"Where?" demanded Gilbert, suddenly starting from his leaning position.

"By the hill—where the jaguar whets his beak on the mesquite and the alacran crawls on the tree."

"Tom, I believe you are less a fool than men claim. You know what you are doing and I want more light myself. Do you know where Nida Percival is?"

"If I did, she would not be lost. Let us seek and find. The teeth of the mustang will never grind the corn that is not grown. Follow Tom and learn wisdom of a fool."

"Once, you warned me against the Percivals. You said that a curse was on the house and that every stick and stone was doomed to destruction. You spoke of poison, fire and other calamities, and you said that a dark cloud was hanging over them all, which, when it burst, would carry destruction to all beneath the roof."

"Was not the fool right?" demanded the Rover, fiercely.

"You were right, but it was not the idle fancy of a fool that led you to think and say as you did. You know more than you pretend. Now, will you cease your masquerading and speak plainly?"

The guide broke into a hoarse chuckle, then, growing suddenly mysterious, he drew Gilbert to his side.

"Listen to me," he said, with deep solemnity. "You have asked a question—this is my answer! If you would learn wisdom, sell your brain and buy a mule. If you would be happy, go ask the fool—"

Gilbert angrily shook off his hold.

"Lead on!" he ordered. "Lead where you will, even though it be to the devil. Get in motion, at once, and hold your tongue. But, see here, my man; if you are wiser than you seem, I promise you a fat reward if you will find Nida Percival. Bear that in mind and move on."

The Rover muttered something Gilbert did not understand, and then he turned away and their journey was resumed.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SCORPIONS IN CAMP.

LEAVING Gilbert and his guide for a time, let us again visit the knoll to which we lately saw Mad Tom conduct the Scorpions under El Tigre.

The place was not deserted, though any one who might have been reconnoitering the vicinity would have found it hard to distinguish anything in the darkness.

Yet, there were several persons on the knoll—the Scorpions and their prisoners.

The lesser lights of the strange band were grouped about as suited their fancy, and at one side were Nida, Violette and Paula. All had bonds upon their hands; all appeared to be veritable prisoners; and that the two former were so was beyond a doubt.

Violette uttered more complaints than both of the others, and she wept as fast as she could gather tears for the shedding. In her heart she cursed the day that she left her former quarters at Mariot's bidding, and now she had no doubt but what she would be tortured and killed at the abductors' convenience.

Nida and Paula were outwardly calm. Perhaps the latter had nothing to fear, while Nida, with natural heroism, endeavored to bear all as philosophically as possible and trust to her friends to rescue her.

At times she feared Roland Gilbert had been killed, for she had not seen him at any time during the terrible drama at her father's house; but she had herself watched Giles as he cut his way through the Scorpions after the most gallant fight she had ever seen.

Even in her captivity, she thrilled as she remembered it.

Her first sight of her brother had been as he stood with his back against the wall, a leveled revolver in each hand and a bowie held in his teeth; and as the Scorpions rushed upon him those deadly revolvers had blazed with machine-like regularity until dead men lay all about him; then with a grand rush he had cleared a passage through the surviving Mexicans and leaped from a window.

Giles was alive, and she felt sure he would rescue her.

Near the girls, El Tigre stood, statue-like, beside a tree, and stared into the night with the fixed look of one who thinks on important subjects.

It was the most critical moment of his life. He was trying to decide between duty and inclination. That night he had hoped to kill Giles Percival and end the vendetta the Silver Scorpions had sworn against him; and at the same time to secure Nida for a personal prize.

In the last scheme he had been successful, but Giles, after fighting like a demon, had escaped, and so, standing by himself, El Tigre was trying to decide whether he should take the girl and flee across the Rio Grande, or abandon her and the others, who could but be clogs upon his future movements, and remain to hunt Giles Percival further.

In the midst of his reflections and mental struggles, a man came to his side and stood looking into his face with a strange mixture of anger, defiance and pleading.

The man was Colonel Mariot. El Tigre had called on him to take some of his trustworthy men and aid in the attack on Percival's, and the colonel had not dared refuse. Once, he, too, had belonged to the Scorpion Brothers, and his vows bade him help them whenever called upon; but more than all else he feared the daggers of the band.

Not daring to refuse, he had assumed a disguise and aided in the terrible work, but he had begun to

fear that El Tigre would not keep a certain promise he had made him, as well as that the Rangers would discover that he had worked with the Scorpions.

So far, his mask had protected him, and not even Violette suspected that he was in the gang of marauders.

El Tigre looked up coldly as he approached.

"How much longer do we remain here?" the colonel asked, trying to speak pleasantly.

"Until we leave," said the chief, curtly.

"When will that be?"

"You will see when we move."

"But, Costello, it will never do for me to remain here. If any of the Percivals survived, they will rush at once to my house. When they get there they will find me gone. They don't love me now, and at the first suspicious sign they will be liable to connect me with this slaughter."

"In that case, I advise you to go home."

"Can you furnish horses for the girls?"

"What girls?"

"Nida and Violette—though I really care nothing for the latter."

The chief turned around until he faced his ally squarely. The reading of faces was not possible in the darkness, but he brought his own gaze to bear on that of Mariot, and the resolution there expressed crept into his voice.

"So you have still got the girl on the brain? Well, I am sorry for you, Mariot, for I have made up my mind to take her into my house—when I get one. I have never been an admirer of women, but I fancy this Nida a good deal, and I mean to make her my wife. I think I can some day raise her to an exalted position."

He had spoken with alternate firmness and indifference, but every word was like a knell to Mariot's hopes. Had it been less dark, El Tigre would have seen bitter disappointment expressed on his dark face, and then, later, rage and menace.

"But you promised her to me."

"Promises are more frequently broken than kept, señor."

"You solemnly promised, Costello. She was to be the price of my service."

"The fact that you expected pay proves your lack of fitness to receive it. Your vows to the Scorpion Brothers compel you to obey and serve them at all times. I had to use a little strategy to secure your earnest co-operation, but I am telling the truth now. Nida is for me, not for you."

"And you refuse to keep your word?"

"Yes; what of it?"

El Tigre asked the question curtly, and there was menace in his voice. His hand, too, dropped to the revolver in his belt.

Mariot saw all his plans and hopes drifting away into space, but he was as cunning as the man he called Costello. He knew that if he openly rebelled he would never see another ten minutes of life, and that if he sulked he would be closely watched—perhaps silently stabbed to the heart when opportunity offered.

He was not to be frightened or driven off, however. He considered that Nida belonged to him, and he meant to have her or die in the attempt.

"I had not expected this," he slowly said; "but if you are really in earnest—"

"I am in earnest; what of it?"

"Then I have but two chances left to me—to flee the country to escape Giles Percival, or to join the Scorpions anew and try to win glory through the League."

El Tigre looked at him suspiciously.

"What mischief are you plotting now?" he asked, harshly.

"None. Why do you suspect me? You have taken away my other ambition—I turn to what is left."

"So be it," said the chief, abruptly, "but I warn you against treachery. I rule with a heavy hand and the fate of a traitor is death. Make yourself at home with the men, and if you serve faithfully you shall be rewarded in like measure."

"I accept the trust," said Mariot, as he turned away.

El Tigre's lip curled and he looked after him with a scowl.

"Is he fool enough to believe I trust him? It may be, but it is my motto that men are only truly faithful when they are watched. Mariot has a strong temptation to play the traitor—I will watch him."

But he fell again into thought, and the fox moved before the trap was set.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

TREACHERY.

MARIOT walked away in a mood dangerous to the Scorpion chief. It had been many a year since any man had dared to talk to him as Costello had done, and had he possessed no other cause for dissatisfaction, he would have rebelled at such treatment.

As it was, with Nida lost to him, so far as the plans of the chief could control the future, his anger arose in a hot and menacing current with the wind blowing directly toward the position of El Tigre.

"I'll have her or die!" muttered the Frenchman, grinding his teeth. "When I set my mind on a prize, human or otherwise, I am going to have it unless some other man plays big cards. Now, though it is a desperate game to dare the wrath of the grand chief of the Silver Scorpions, I am going to buck squarely against Costello, and if he gets me into a corner, I'll shoot him like a dog."

He turned the corner of the camp and walked cautiously toward where the three girls were seated together. There he paused, staring at them through the darkness and trying to settle on a plan which promised success.

Had Nida been alone, he could have quickly freed her, but Violette and Paula were there, and the last of the two was as dangerous as any man in the camp. She had before then acted at Mariot's request, but his hold over her was as nothing compared to that of the Scorpions.

She had sworn to work for their interests, and with her to live was to be faithful. He could not hope for her aid in his own scheme.

As for Violette, she had no master, and Mariot was her only friend. He could trust her, but, just then, he wished she was a thousand miles away.

He reflected for some time and then came to a conclusion.

His only hope was to promptly and silently overpower Paula and then take the other girls away. If a slight start could be gained, he hoped they would succeed in avoiding the Scorpions in the darkness.

Down on his knees went the colonel, but he had made but a single movement in advance when a hand was laid upon his shoulder.

He sprang to his feet like a flash, but a soothing voice spoke in his ear:

"Hush! Be silent for your life, colonel. We are friends. Do you not know me—I am Roland Gilbert."

Mariot saw two dark forms and recognized the voice, but he hardly knew whether to be pleased or not. Gilbert was his rival—but in such a crisis it would be best to forget that fact, perhaps, and join hands against a mutual enemy. Luckily, too, not one of the girls suspected that he was in the party.

"Who is with you?" he quietly asked.

"Only Tom, the Rover. He has guided me through the chaparral and behaved splendidly. Can anything be done?"

"I am going to make an attempt."

"Where are the girls?"

"Haven't you seen them?"

"No. I have only just discovered the Mexicans' camp."

Mariot explained the situation and his own plans. He had to in some way account for his want of confidence in Paula, and so said he had overheard the Mexicans say that her captivity was but a farce, and that she was really a spy on Nida and Violette.

The cordiality of the colonel would at any other time have made Gilbert suspicious, for they had talked together but little of late, but the situation made him forgetful of this, and they formally joined their hands.

Mad Tom stood by and said nothing. He had faithfully guided Gilbert to the camp, but, after Mariot appeared, had relapsed into a silent mood and seemed utterly useless.

The other men, however, prepared to carry out their schemes, the first step of which was to overpower Paula without creating an alarm.

This delicate task was undertaken by the colonel, with Gilbert close behind to rush in and try bolder measures if discovery and alarm followed.

Mariot crept silently up the slope, while Gilbert lay at the foot and eagerly watched him.

The young man had entirely forgotten Half-witted Tom, but as something touched him on the arm he looked up to see the Rover.

"Be silent as death, Tom!" said Gilbert, fearful that an incautious word would betray them.

"When lightning howls and thunder is visible, doubt Tom. Until then trust him, for there are none so safe as fools. Wise men are not so sure. When the rattlesnake's fangs are drawn he is harmless, but not until then."

"Do not talk now," said Gilbert, impatiently.

"You want to watch the man who crawls," said the Rover, pointing to Mariot. "You are wise. Watch him now, to-morrow, next week, always. He is safe while he is watched."

The speaker crept back a few paces and lay on the ground like a log; but, somehow, Gilbert could not forget what he had just said. He had directed him to watch Mariot and intimated that he was not trustworthy.

Was there reason for what he had said?

The question slipped Gilbert's mind as he saw the colonel reach the vicinity of the girls. He saw him arise to his knees and hover over Paula, but he seemed terribly slow to seize her.

Gilbert was in a state of excitement unusual to him; but what man can be blamed for losing his coolness when the fate of the woman he loves hangs poised as by a thread?

The crisis was at hand.

Mariot moved slowly but surely, and when his strong hands fell upon Paula his grasp was like steel. One hand he had thrown across her mouth, and while he thus prevented an outcry he drew her close to himself and nearly crushed her slight form in his hold.

"For Heaven's sake, ladies, be calm!" he said, turning his face toward Nida and Violette.

Greatly to his surprise neither of them uttered a cry. With the former it was natural heroism, while the latter was too alarmed to utter even a whisper.

Gilbert came up the slope as rapidly as he dared.

"Have no fear," he said, looking at the girls and calling them by name. "It is I—Gilbert."

Then he turned to aid Mariot. The latter had previously supplied himself with cords, and by their use Paula was soon securely bound. After this she was gagged, and her conquest was successfully accomplished.

So far their success had been brilliant.

Nida, seeing Violette's excited state, had succeeded in making her understand the situation, and as the two men turned toward them they found all ready for the next step in the work.

The hands of the two girls were released, and leaving Paula on the ground to reflect at her leisure, all went down the slope as quickly as was safe.

They were none too soon, for they had scarcely reached the side of Mad Tom when he pointed upward with one hand, and looking they saw a man on the very ground they had just left.

It was a terribly exciting moment. He seemed likely to discover Paula or to notice the absence of the other girls, and while he remained at his post they could not stir without being heard.

He turned his head and looked directly down at them. They crouched close to the ground, Gilbert and Mariot with their knives drawn, but after a short pause he walked on, and the imminent danger passed.

"Let us go!" said Gilbert, quickly.

He had taken the arm of Nida, and as Mariot could do no better he did the same for Violette.

Mad Tom continued silent, but showed an inclination to hover in the rear. Whatever thoughts were in his clouded mind he kept to himself, but it was worthy of notice that he stepped as lightly as any of the others.

Gilbert did not forget his previous good service, or that the chaparral was practically a strange place to Mariot and himself, and when a safe distance had been traversed he paused and waited for the man to come up.

"Tom," he said, kindly, "will you show us the shortest way out of this wood?"

"Climb to the top of yonder tree," said the Rover tersely, "then you'll be out of the wood."

"Don't trifle now," said Gilbert, earnestly; "this is a momentous crisis in our affairs. All will soon be won or lost. Promise to guide me as well as you did before, and I will defy those wretches."

"I can't," whined the Rover, dolefully. "I am sick, lame, blind—nay, I have a cramp. Go to the wise for wisdom; a fool can do you no good. 'Poor Tom's a-cold! Poor Tom's a-cold!'"

The eccentric being bent low over his staff, moaned and looked the picture of distress.

Gilbert was almost tempted to despair. To have their guide strike a perverse mood at just the time when they most needed his services, was discouraging to say the least.

Suddenly Tom started into new life.

"Ha! see the foul fiend!" he exclaimed. "Wait, and I'll beat him to a jelly. Now I see him, and now I have him—there—and there—and there!"

With each of the last words he thrust at the ground with the end of his staff. Gilbert sprang forward and caught his hand.

"For God's sake be silent!" he commanded. "Would you ruin us all?"

CHAPTER XXXV.

A WILD FLIGHT.

THE ROVER ceased his antics without a word or motion of remonstrance, and stood like a statue, both hands clasped around his staff.

"Spend no more time with that fool!" said Colonel Mariot angrily. "This delay may be fatal to our hopes, and besides, I doubt if the fellow is worthy of confidence. Let us push forward, and use our own best judgment."

Gilbert turned reluctantly away from his late guide.

He had served him so faithfully before that he felt sure he could do so again if he would; but, as Mariot had said, they could not lose any more time.

He took Nida's arm and moved on, followed by the colonel and Violette, and half a mile had been traveled when it was discovered that Mad Tom had entirely disappeared from view.

All possible speed was used in their flight, but even at that their progress was terribly slow. In those thick and thorny bushes it was bad enough for even a man to pass, and the dresses of the girls rendered their advance difficult, painful, and slow.

Still, the expected pursuit was not heard behind, and they began to gather fresh courage.

The probability of escape turned the colonel's mind from the Scorpions into a fresh channel, but it was one suitable only for a demon's consideration.

Circumstances had for a time led him to join hands with Gilbert, but even then he did not forget that he was his rival in love, and when, at the start, the younger man had so coolly appropriated Nida, Mariot felt like knocking him down.

Now, with the sky a little clearer, so far as the Mexicans were concerned, he fell to thinking what a fine place the chaparral would be to leave the dead body of his rival. The chances were, no trace of him would ever be found, and, if such a trace was chanced upon, the beasts and birds of prey would before then have destroyed all but his bones.

It was a thought just to Mariot's taste, and had he and Gilbert been alone, he would unhesitatingly have stabbed him in the back.

Nida stood in the way of such a deed, but he began to study ways and means to accomplish it after all.

"Violette," he said, in a subdued voice, "have you regained your coolness?"

"Mercy, no!" she said. "I am frightened to death."

"You were not so timid when you stood at the card-tables of New Orleans."

"Ah! but that was for money!"

"So that is your vulnerable spot. Good! I shall be able to accommodate you. I want to leave Roland Gilbert dead in this wood, and I want your help. It is worth a thousand dollars to me."

"Caramba! you pay like a prince, senor. Of course a thousand dollars will overcome the scruples I naturally have to taking part in such a business transaction."

Violette spoke without any trace of feeling.

"Good, again. Now, hear my plan, which is the simplest in the world. Very soon we will stop those turtle-doves at our front, and tell them we have heard suspicious sounds behind us. You will do your part as well as you know how. Then I will ask you three to halt until I retrace my steps a little. I will go, but fail to return. You will get anxious and beseech Gilbert to look after the 'poor colonel.' He will go and meet me. He will stay there. When he is down I will make a racket and come rushing toward you, saying we are attacked. Result, we all run and escape, but Gilbert misses his breakfast right along every morning thereafter."

Mariot unfolded his villainous scheme with all the coolness in the world, and Violette listened as calmly.

It would not be the first man she had helped to forever put out of the world.

Five minutes later the evil pair hurried nearer to Gilbert and Nida.

"I think we had better stop," said the colonel. "There are suspicious sounds behind us."

"Oh! we shall be killed; I know we shall," added Violette. "I can hear those horrible men all along the woods."

"It may be only harmless denizens of the chaparral," said Mariot, blandly, "but we had better make sure. If you three will remain right here, I'll fall back a bit and reconnoiter."

"Oh, don't, colonel, you'll be killed!" said Mademoiselle Aubry, with a shudder.

"Nonsense! Don't fear for me," said Mariot, lightly. "Just guard the ladies while I am away, Gilbert, and I'll show you I am no mean scout."

Roland suggested that he remain with them and await the result; but for ample reasons, the colonel overruled his plan, and disappeared in the darkness along the back track.

Violette was to all appearances, filled with fresh alarm. She shivered, moaned and bewailed their fate until Gilbert was obliged to tell her to keep quiet.

On his part, he heard no unusual sound. Nocturnal beasts and birds were abroad, but none of them showed a disposition to molest the fugitives, and otherwise the chaparral seemed peaceful, though Gilbert could not understand why they had seen no sign of the pursuers.

The disappearance of Mad Tom, too, caused him some wonder, but what worrying he did was devoted to other subjects.

Slowly the minutes wore on until the absence of Mariot became a subject of comment. He had taken ample time for an elaborate scout, and still he did not appear.

Violette expressed anxiety, and as additional minutes passed, grew outwardly terribly nervous. Finally she implored Gilbert to go to his aid if he was in trouble, and if not, to find and bring him back; and the young man reluctantly obeyed, despite the expressed misgivings of Nida.

On his own part he had little confidence in Mariot's abilities as a scout, and thought it probable he was hiding in some cover awaiting an imaginary pursuer.

Gilbert went along the back track for several rods, and then paused and called the name of the colonel in a subdued voice, but no answer came.

He did not, however, see the dark form which skulked at his heels, knife in hand.

If he had, he would have given the colonel credit for more ability as a scout, since he made so little noise, and the naked knife might have awakened his suspicions on another point.

Gilbert went a little further, paused again, and once more called Mariot's name.

At that moment there was a peculiar rustling behind him, and filled with a sudden apprehension, he started to wheel around.

Then the colonel struck. Through the air swept his knife, and in a moment more it was buried to the hilt in Gilbert's body, the hot blood spurting out over the assassin's hand.

Bitter hatred had made the blow more forcible than was necessary, and before its power the victim was dashed to one side, where he collided with a tree and then fell prostrate to the ground.

One moan only did he utter after receiving the blow, and, once down, he lay without motion.

The deed was done; the colonel had removed his rival, and it only remained to carry out the rest of his vile plot.

He had intended to make the next act as quiet as was consistent with reason, but, as he realized that a murder lay at his door, he resolved to make sure of what followed, even if he brought all the Scorpions upon them.

Consequently, he drew his revolvers and began firing them off in an irregular way, never stopping until eight shots had been discharged.

Then he rushed back to where he had left Nida and Violette.

"Run!" he gasped, in pretended terror; "run for your lives. The demons are upon us—away!"

He caught Nida by the arm, but, even then, terribly frightened though she was, she missed one face that ought to have been there.

"Roland!" she cried. "Oh! Colonel Mariot, where is Roland?"

"I don't know—gone ahead, I think. Don't stop a minute—Ha! there is another!"

He blazed away at an imaginary foe, and, just then, the cry of a jaguar added to the horror of the moment. Nida was almost stunned by the situation. The absence of Roland Gilbert at such a crisis indicated the worst that could occur, and all the strength of her body and limbs seemed gone.

Mariot and Violette each caught one of her arms and she was hurried away through the undergrowth. The female plotter whispered encouraging words in her ear and declared that Gilbert would soon appear; and Nida yielded to the demands of self-preservation and made what haste she could.

As for the colonel, he was wildly exultant. He longed to shout for joy, but worked off his exuberance by warlike actions and outspoken defiance of the Mexicans.

Gilbert was dead, the jaguars would soon destroy all evidence of his crime, and as he looked ahead to an imaginary smooth road to complete triumph, the colonel felt able to face the whole army of Scorpions.

Strangely enough, they did not appear or make themselves heard, even with so good a clew to the situation as had been furnished by Mariot's reckless firing.

The trio went on through the undergrowth as rapidly as possible. The colonel did well, for his exultation gave him fictitious strength and zeal, and their advance was rapid and successful.

Only one thing troubled him—he was not sure that they were going in a direct course. In that dense wood there was all the chance in the world to become bewildered, and, perhaps, to move in a circle.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

UNEXPECTED WITNESSES.

WHEN Buck Butler reached the village of Danby, he found the place already aroused, and it was not long before he saw Giles Percival with a number of the Rangers about him. That young man had fought his way through the Scorpions at the burning house, rescued his father from an assassin's hand, and, seeing that Nida and the other girls were helpless prisoners, had ridden to Danby to arouse the people.

He had seen the elder Percival in safe quarters, and was well advanced on his later work, when the Ranger captain appeared.

Buck at once took charge, and in a short time twenty brave men, armed to the teeth, were ready to follow where he led. He knew each man personally, for they were of his own band, and he knew they were to be trusted.

As they were about to start, one of Percival's herdsmen came into town. He had a bad wound on the hand, and was fit only for bed, but he brought important news. Badly injured as he was, he had trailed the Scorpions from the burning house until he saw them enter the chaparral.

With this foundation upon which to work, Buck

quickly laid his plans. He divided his band into two divisions; the first, led by himself, to ride rapidly around the western side of the chaparral, and the second, under Giles, to act the same part on the eastern prairie.

In addition to these parties, a third was to be formed which should march through the heart of South Forest as soon as possible.

The object of this was to hem the marauders in and leave them no way of escape. The men under Buck and Giles, moving on the open prairie, could reach the Rio Grande before the Mexicans, who had taken to the wood; and when the third party moved the result could not be in doubt.

A short distance out on the Danby road, Giles separated from Buck, and led his own division along the eastern prairie, always keeping near the wood. It was a remarkably silent ride, but Percival had relapsed into a stern and even morose mood.

He had ample food for thought.

Despite all his precautions, the Silver Scorpions had brought ruin and sorrow to the Percival household. The dwellings were in coals and ashes, and Nida was a prisoner.

Just how they had effected their purpose he did not know, but a talk with Buck had made all tolerably clear. They had crept on the outer guards, one by one, with devilish skill, and overpowered them by their national weapon—the lasso. After that they had gained entrance to the house—how, he did not know, but he was pretty sure that, despite all his precautions, Paula had been their instrument of success.

"Why did I not strangle her when first I began to suspect?" he bitterly thought. "Fool that I was, to try to match a woman at cunning. If I had at once set that Madonna-faced fiend adrift, this might not have occurred."

Then he thought of the fight at the house. Truly brave men are modest, and he did not take credit to himself for what he had done; but he had never made a braver fight than when he stood in that burning house, flame and smoke all around him, his back to the wall, and with a revolver in each hand and his bowie in his teeth, facing the blood-seeking Mexicans.

"Once again I foiled El Tigre, but I had better have died. What ruin and misery have I brought with me to Texas! Nida a prisoner, the house in flames and dead men all along the prairie. My sin has brought coals of fire upon my head, and when Nida is rescued, I will leave Texas forever. Then, let the Scorpion Brothers follow me if they will—I'll fight them hand-to-hand, any way, or in any place. My curse rest upon them!"

He ground his strong teeth together and gripped the barrel of his rifle as though to crush it in his hand, and when one of his followers spoke, his words fell on unhearing ears.

Before daylight the party reached the Rio Grande, but not a sign had they seen of the marauders, so they scattered and began to patrol the prairie along the chaparral's edge.

Day dawned at last and all the Rangers collected in an offshoot of the wood for breakfast, though such a position was taken that their watch could still be kept.

As fate would have it, they saw something, and it was a sight which brought Giles Percival to his feet like a flash.

An exclamation from a grizzled Ranger had caused him to look toward the chaparral. Three persons had just emerged from the bushes and were moving toward the Rangers' camp.

All saw them, and then up from the rough riders went a ringing cheer—the new-comers were Nida, Violette and Colonel Mariot.

Giles strode rapidly toward them, and as he went he saw that, though torn and wounded by the thorny bushes, and evidently almost exhausted, they were still in possession of the essentials of life.

For their own part, Mariot was waving his hat and Violette her handkerchief, for the cheer of the Rangers had been rare music to their ears.

Providence had guided them through the chaparral, and though they had wandered far from the course they had first undertaken, they had emerged at the best point of all.

Giles Percival's face was happier than it had been for many days, but he greeted them with his usual quiet composure.

Nida, however, crept to his arms.

"Oh! Giles, I am so glad, so glad!" she said, with a weary sigh, as she laid her head on his shoulder.

A look, which was almost one of alarm, had at first crossed his face, and he seemed to shrink from her; but the expression passed, his strong features worked with perceptible emotion, and he softly caressed her hair and spoke words of cheer.

"It would be a happy reunion if it wasn't for one thing," said Mariot, nervously.

"What is that?" Giles asked.

"Poor Gilbert is missing, and—and we fear the worst."

"What?" demanded Percival, impetuously.

"Oh! Mr. Giles, it is so dreadful!" moaned Violette, brushing her eyes.

"Explain!"

Mariot told the elaborate story of Gilbert's mysterious (?) and ominous disappearance, and as Giles did not then think of doubting him, the blow cut to his very heart. The missing man had been his friend, but he had been Nida's idol, her hope of the future.

Strangely white grew strong Giles Percival then, and internally he framed a cry of agony.

"My God! forgive me; it is another link in the chain. His death lies at my door. But for the crime I committed, the Scorpion Brothers would not have come to Texas, and but for their coming, Roland Gilbert would now be alive!"

But these words were unspoken, and the stricken man gave no evidence that he heard. He was dimly conscious that Violette and the colonel were talking, but he put Nida aside and spoke in a voice which was hoarse and harsh.

"Go to the camp, all of you, I want to be alone!"

Violette looked at him quickly and curiously. She alone had discovered the peculiarity of his manner, but she obtained no clew from his firm face.

No one thought of disobeying; the trio went to be received and made comfortable by the Rangers; and Giles Percival strode forward until near the edge of chaparral.

Such of his men who saw him there, believed he was listening for signs from friend or foe, but he was really unconscious of what was transpiring around him.

All his energies were centered in deep thought. Half an hour passed, and then he abruptly raised his head. He had heard a sound in the chaparral as of moving men. He looked, and then almost staggered back.

Two persons had emerged from the bushes, and both were well-known to him. The first, though pale and blood-stained in alternate spots, was undoubtedly Roland Gilbert in the flesh, and he was moving with considerable strength, supported by the arm of a man who handled him with evident tenderness.

This man was Mad Tom, the Prairie Rover. A strange picture they made as they stood there. Both were blood-stained and rent by thorns, and the Rover, with one arm about Gilbert's waist and the other hand grasping his long staff, looked like a rustic background for a picture, with his rags, his ornaments of straw, and his eyes gleaming wildly through his matted hair.

One moment Giles looked stupefied, and then he sprang forward and seized Gilbert's hand. Excited and joyous words passed between them, but Mad Tom did not heed what they were saying.

His wild eyes were moving restlessly. He looked first at the ground, and then around the prairie, but as none of the Rangers were in sight, seemed at fault.

Suddenly he turned upon Giles. "Where has the vulture gone after his feast?" he demanded, fiercely. "His trail is in the grass, but he has hid his head. Poor Tom has chased him over roaring whirlpools, seething volcanoes, and quaking earth. Where does the foul fiend hide his head?"

Gilbert suddenly aroused. "Have you seen Mariot?" he asked of Giles. "Yes, he is even now in yonder *motte*." "Then, by Heaven, lead me to him. I have an account to square with him—it was his murderous hand that gave me this wound!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE ASSASSIN'S FLIGHT.

COLONEL MARIOT had conducted Nida and Violette to the *motte*, and had allowed himself to be called a hero without much remonstrance, but when he found that the number of the rescue-party was so small, he began to feel uneasy lest the Scorpions should make their appearance.

From his own experience he knew they outnumbered Giles Percival's men.

So after a while he walked to the edge of the *motte* to see if Giles was in sight, intending to urge an immediate departure from the vicinity.

He saw the young man near the chaparral proper, but just as he was going to break cover and go to him, another sight met his gaze.

Two men emerged from the wood, and he recognized Roland Gilbert and Mad Tom.

Mariot reeled back and caught at a branch to keep himself from falling. For a moment all strength deserted him, and he was like a child. In that moment he saw all his hopes for a future in Texas dashed to the ground. The man he had attempted to murder had appeared, and would denounce him; he would be seized and executed for his crime.

For a little while he saw a vision of himself struggling in the hands of Judge Lynch, of a gallows-tree and a noosed lasso; and then came a revulsion of feeling, his strength and wits returned, and he was once more the cool, energetic man who had conceived plans and won them in the past.

One brief space of time was left him in which to escape the vengeance of justice, and he must abandon past honors, his houses and lands, Nida—all, and save his own life while he could.

At the other side of the grove the horses of the Rangers were fitfully grazing. Mariot knew this, and, hastened by the wild stare he saw Mad Tom bestowing upon the *motte*, he turned and strode toward them.

Once more fortune favored the Frenchman. Nida, wishing to be alone with her sorrow, had gone to the farther side of the camp and was looking gloomily out on the prairie.

Violette had followed at a distance and was halfway between the other girl and the Rangers.

A sudden joy leaped into Mariot's heart. He must take to desperate flight, but Nida should go with him—no power on earth could prevent him from carrying her off under the circumstances.

He strode toward her, the old half-smile curling his lips, his eyes sparkling triumphantly; and, so absorbed was she in thought, she did not discover his coming until his hand fell upon her arm.

Then it was too late. Covering her mouth to prevent an outcry, he lifted her bodily and strode toward the horses. She struggled, but her strength was of no avail against his.

He reached one of the finest looking horses, gained its back with his prisoner and dashed away from the point of danger. Looking back when he had gone fifty yards, he saw Violette following. She had seen his flight, and, suspecting that some danger was at hand, had promptly captured a horse and started after him.

All this was a matter of indifference to Mariot. He was looking back toward the *motte*, expecting every moment to see a commotion there, and trying to obtain enough of a start to enable him to laugh at bullets.

His own situation was not very promising. Had he been wise he would have taken an extra horse, but as it was, his own steed was carrying double, and he had neither saddle nor bridle.

These things, however, had not yet occurred to him.

All at once there was a shout in the rear, and, turning his head again, he saw men at the edge of the timber, with Mad Tom and Giles Percival at their head.

He sneered as he heard their angry shouts, but as two or three rifles were raised and fired the bullets whizzed uncomfortably close to his head.

Then the Rangers made a rush for their horses, and a little later nine of his enemies, all told, started

on his trail. Some staid behind because there were no horses for them, but Giles and the Rover were at the front of the pursuers.

By the time the start was fairly made Mariot was far enough in advance to be safe from bullets for awhile. Could he hold that lead? then became a vital question with him.

He reflected, and decided that his position was an uncertain one. If his horse was trained, a whistle from its former owner might at any moment cause it to wheel, and he did not possess a bridle to govern its inclinations.

A critical survey convinced him that he had chosen the best horse in the lot; even that of Violette, a fine animal, was barely keeping abreast with him, though far less heavily laden; but it did not stand to reason that the brute could long carry double and maintain his lead.

When he faltered what was to be done? Better abandon Nida than to lose his own life, but Mariot was resolved to hold to her if possible.

Ah! a brilliant idea strikes the fugitive. If any one is left behind it shall be Violette. Of course, she will not agree to such a thing, and his course will be cowardly, but through all his life the colonel has made his own interests his chief object of study.

A broad, level prairie stretched before them, giving plenty of room for the race, and, as all settled down to the work, the scene was exciting.

Two miles were soon traveled, and then Mariot began to look anxious. Despite his great speed and gallant efforts, his overlaid horse was beginning to lose ground. The pursuers were gaining slowly, and the breathing of the leading horse was not so good as his master could wish.

The latter looked stealthily at Violette. She was riding by his side and was perfectly cool. At the first, when she fully realized the situation, she had grown pale, but the color was again in her cheeks, and her very silence showed that she was in one of her bravest moods.

Nida, too, was silent. The colonel has hissed in her ears that she must make no resistance, and, since she had never liked him, it was easy to believe him an enemy.

Again Mariot glanced at Violette. She was looking back at the pursuers, and her back was toward him.

He rode a little nearer and, putting out his hand, gave her a sudden, strong push.

The cowardly act could have but one result—she went quickly off her horse and fell prostrate on the prairie, and then Mariot caught the animal by the mane.

"Coward!" exclaimed Nida, impulsively, as she looked back to where Violette still lay on the ground.

The fall had momentarily stunned her.

"Call it what you will," said Mariot, harshly; "it means escape for me. I am now going to place you on her horse, and I hope you will keep by my side without giving me trouble."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," she answered, defiantly.

"You had better," he said, with a look which frightened her. "Nida Percival, I am now a desperate and hunted man. If yonder dogs capture me, no power on earth can save my life. Knowing this, I am riding to save that life, and I shall let no milk-and-water sentimentality stand between me and success."

"But why do you take me?"

"For my wife! You see the whole plot now. I want you and I mean to have you. Still, I will do you no harm. If my enemies outride or outwit me, you may go to them in safety; but so long as there is hope for me, if you try to escape, beware! Do you hear?"

She heard, and, looking at his curling lips, said she would obey him. She would as soon have angered a jaguar as Mariot at that moment.

He easily lifted her from one horse to another, and then, keeping hold of the second animal's mane, they swept forward at an increased rate of speed.

A few miles ahead were more trees, in groups and belts, along and near the banks of the Rio Grande, and, knowing the country was there broken and hilly, the fugitive had strong hopes of being able to evade his pursuers.

One of the latter had paused beside Violette, while the rest kept on, and Giles Percival, looking back, saw the girl standing erect and, finally, starting for Danby with the Ranger for a guide, as had been directed by the young leader.

The thoughts of mademoiselle could not have been very pleasant at that time.

Giles turned from this view to look at Mad Tom, who had from the first kept near his side. The Rover presented a peculiar appearance, but he sat in the saddle like a centaur.

His rags and wisps of straw waved erratically about him as they were caught by the wind, and his staff, which he persistently retained, was carried like the lance of some barbarian chief, but the intentness with which he watched the fugitive was proof that his mind grasped the object of the chase.

Giles had vainly tried to learn from him more about the events of the previous night, but he was fast coming to regard the man with interest.

"Suppose we meet some enemy, Tom," he gently said; "you have no weapons."

"A wise fool needs none," was the curt reply. "Let Tom alone, pity the poor and talk charity to the deaf. A dumb man never talks folly."

Giles sighed and turned his head away. There were times when he thought the Rover less foolish than people supposed, but such hopes were usually dashed to the ground as soon as formed.

He said no more, for it was plain that the man preferred to manage his own affairs and keep his own counsel.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CAUGHT AT LAST.

WHEN Roland Gilbert was left behind at the *motte*, he had for company the three Rangers, whose horses had been appropriated by Mariot, Violette and Mad Tom. The march of events had left them without means of joining in the chase, and they saw the others go with many a growl at their own luck.

Gilbert was not badly hurt. He had lost some

blood, but he had a good constitution and plenty of courage, and he bore all philosophically.

Mariot had never made a greater mistake than when he supposed he had stabbed him to the heart.

As will be remembered, Gilbert had been turning about when the blow was struck, and the knife passed between his arm and body, wounding him in two places and meeting with enough resistance to deceive the would-be assassin; and at the same time the force of the blow dashed the victim against a tree so as to stun and drop him to the ground.

Lying thus, he heard nothing of Mariot's pistol-shooting, and when he recovered he was in the hands of a friend.

In brief, it was Mad Tom who had come to his aid, and already the flow of blood was stopped.

Afterward Gilbert gave an eloquent account of how the Rover helped him through the forest; how he told in his wild way of Mariot's crime; and how they hung upon the rear of the other party until they finally appeared to Giles Percival as has been told.

Gilbert had told his friend of the cowardly attempt on his life, and he felt satisfied to leave vengeance to him.

He intended, on his own part, to remain at the *motte* and gather strength for the forenoon; but, an hour after the departure of Percival's men, Buck Butler appeared with his command, and the task of getting to Danby was simplified.

Buck only waited to hear the news ready for him, and then, leaving one horse for Gilbert, he, too, with his men, dashed away to hunt down Nida's abductor.

At this same time another company of horsemen were moving in the same direction as the others, but at a point nearer to the Rio Grande and where they were concealed by the scattered timber that lined the vicinity of the river-bank.

These men were eighteen in number, all well mounted and armed, and dressed in simple Texan costumes; but it needed only a critical look at their faces to show an observer that they were under false colors, for their features were plainly Mexican.

In brief, they were El Tigre and his fellow Scorpions.

As they rode down the river there was something secret and ominous in their manner, which indicated that they had not yet abandoned their hostile purposes; and when one glanced out over the eastern prairie the cause of their journeying was easily understood.

There, in plain view, Giles Percival and his friends could be seen pursuing Mariot.

Consequently, there were four parties in the prairie chase—Mariot, Giles, and his men, Buck Butler's party and the Scorpion Brothers.

El Tigre believed that he saw in himself the winner of the battle and the possessor of the spoils. He clearly saw that Mariot was seeking shelter in the hilly country beyond the open prairie, and once there, the Scorpions, as yet unseen by any of the Texans, could uncover themselves and secure that for which they had crossed the Rio Grande.

Giles Percival and Nida must be captured—the former for torture and death, the latter for a longer if not a more pleasant life. As for the remaining Texans and the colonel, they must be killed if they were troublesome; otherwise, it was a matter of indifference.

Critically viewed, the chances seemed to be in favor of El Tigre. He had eighteen men, counting himself, and the whole Ranger force was but twenty, including Mad Tom; while the Scorpions would doubtless be able to inflict a surprise on the Texans.

Giles Percival tried in vain to diminish the distance which separated him from the fugitive, but the fact was indisputable that the horse rode by Mariot was better, and Nida's fully equal to any of those that followed.

The abductor held his own in the race and steadily approached the broken country before mentioned. Just what he would do when he reached there he did not know, but he hoped to in some way evade his persistent pursuers.

It was a matter of life and death with him—to be captured was to meet the hands of Judge Lynch.

As the fugitive rode in among the trees, Giles put into operation a plan he had previously formed. His small force divided and rode away in the shape of a letter V, the object being to surround Mariot and destroy his last chance of escape.

In making this division, Giles had taken no notice of Mad Tom, but, looking back over his shoulder, he saw the Rover following, his staff pointing above his head and his eyes fixed on vacancy.

"Strange creature," thought Percival. "It is a terrible thing to be thus afflicted, but I wonder if he is not happier than I?"

Followed by three men, Giles hurried along and soon entered the sparse timber. By chance, he caught sight of Mariot still going in a direct line, and shaped his own course accordingly.

One of the Rangers came to him with the advice of a friend.

"See yer, young feller, you are forgettin' one thing, I reckon."

"What is that?"

"While we are tryin' to surround the critter we hain't got nobody on his trail. Ef that ain't tended to he'll double or hide, an' we'll lose him altogether."

It was a point which Giles, in his anxiety and lack of practical border lore, had forgotten, but he at once sent the Ranger to fill the gap.

During this conversation Mad Tom had in some way dropped out of the line, and when Giles once more looked his followers over he saw he had but two men left.

Somehow the knowledge gave him a thrill of uneasiness. Not because of Mariot, for he would have hunted that man alone without a thought of danger, but he did not forget that the Silver Scorpions still lived.

From the time they were robbed of Nida and Violette on the knoll Giles had no tidings from them, but he had seen enough of their way to believe they were still on Texan soil.

"Only death can turn them from their life-hunt," he thought. "Well, so be it. Let me once restore Nida to her friends and I will take my weapons and go out to fight the dogs, man to man, and in a war of extermination!"

His wandering thoughts were again centered upon Colonel Mariot as that person disappeared from view

entirely in a series of wooded knolls. Great care was now necessary or he would escape them by some stratagem; and Giles had heard it said that he was somewhat of a practical borderer.

At the same time they were fast narrowing down his running room. The Rio Grande lay not far ahead, and he must either stop and fight, swim the river, or play hide-and-seek.

Somewhat further on they reached a place where two ridges lay side by side. Both were rocky and covered with trees, large and small, as was the hollow between, but it was a place at which Giles looked with suspicion.

Suddenly one of the Rangers caught his arm. "Look thar, young feller! look thar!" he exclaimed, pointing to one of the ridges.

"Where?"
"By ther dead tree. Hal ye sees it now!"
Giles did see. It was the sight of two horses laboriously climbing the ridge at a steep point, with their riders on their backs, and for the moment open to view.

One of the Rangers raised his rifle, but Giles caught his arm.

"I kin drop ther critter from hyar," declared the man.

"I dare not risk it. A slight deviation of the bullet would cost her a life."

"I don't shoot ter miss— Thar, they're gone!" growled the Texan.

"Do you two get across the ridge as soon as possible, and I will cross over. My horse is good at climbing. Five hundred dollars between you if you capture Colonel Mariot."

The frown vanished from the face of the offended Ranger, and away they went in an impromptu race to see which would first turn the hill.

Meanwhile, Giles urged his horse directly up the ascent. He had forgotten all about the Silver Scorpions—all his thoughts and attention were on Mariot and how to best outwit him.

His horse made the ascent gallantly, and he was soon at the top. A sort of table lay before him, sparsely wooded for the most part, but now and then dotted by thickets.

And directly in advance, so near now that he, too, was tempted to shoot, he saw the colonel and Nida. Their course was still straight ahead, but it seemed to the pursuer that their horses were faltering.

Then Giles shouted to his own animal, and urged him forward for a final great effort. If he could cut down the lead a little more, he would risk a shot and drop Mariot's horse.

Across the table he went at a gallop, his gaze intently fixed on the fugitives.

It would have been better for him had he used his eyes in other directions.

As it was, he did not see that other men were on the level; he did not see the eager glances fixed upon him; he did not see the other horsemen move behind a thicket, or one of their number draw a lasso and stand ready for the cast.

Out from behind the thicket dashed the Texan, and then the lasso shot into the air and, falling with the precision of a master's work, settled over the head of the rider.

The touch of the lasso—with which he was no stranger—suddenly and rudely aroused Giles Percival. Like a flash he comprehended his peril, and up went his hands to cast off the noose.

Too late!
It tightened, and then he was jerked clear of his saddle to fall a moment later, stunned, perhaps dead, on the ground.

Another moment and El Tigre dashed toward the spot, coiling his lasso rapidly as he rode, and followed by his men.

One glance had been enough to tell him that his victim was past resistance.

They lifted him to a position in front of the Scorpion chief, turned their horses, and then rode away toward the west—a course which would take him away from all the Texans.

When Giles Percival recovered his senses, his mind was remarkably calm. He opened his eyes and found himself bound to a tree, with El Tigre and six of the Scorpions grouped around him, their faces dark and ominous.

He remembered how he had been lassoed and needed no explanation, but finding himself naked to the waist, looked down to see what sort of a thing was hanging from his neck and dangling over his breast.

It was the sign of the Silver Scorpions!
He turned toward El Tigre, who was regarding him attentively.

"What sort of mummery is this?" he asked, with a scornful smile, and glancing at the talisman.

"It is the mummery of death, if you like the word. How do you like it, Giles Percival?"

"It is too childish for my taste."

A dark smile crossed the face of the chief.

"Have no fear on that score; we will make the tragedy a full-grown one. You see, you are once more in the hands of the Scorpion Brothers. This time you shall not escape. It has been decreed that you shall die by fire, and in such a way as to torture you most, but that experiment has once failed and I have no time to carry out so elaborate a punishment."

"Just so," said Giles, coolly. "Delay is dangerous."

"We propose to kill you where you are, with our knives, and inside of five minutes. You would have been dead now only we wished to give you time to recover and know that vengeance had overtaken you."

"I approve of that idea. It would have been unseemly haste had you cut me up while I was unconscious. So you are really determined to take my life?"

"Nothing can save you."

"In that case I may as well give up the ship, but as a matter of accommodation in this world, and for statistical purposes in the next, I wish you would tell me why you are so dead set against me."

El Tigre made an impatient, angry gesture.

"Your old cry! I never thought you a fool, Giles Percival."

"Yet I am one—I found it out some time ago when I did a foolish thing. But, all the same, I don't know why you hate me. What have I done?—who are you fellows, anyway?—what is the aim and purpose of the Silver Scorpions?"

But before the last word was spoken the Scorpion chief had turned away in seeming disgust. He spoke to his men and they pressed forward, each with a drawn knife in his hand.

Giles Percival looked at them steadily, but he was mentally bidding adieu to the world. He had no great love for it, but his ambition to die was still smaller, and he did not feel the indifferent words he had spoken to them. Much rather would he live; and in this crisis he saw not one hope of ever again walking the earth.

He was face to face with death.
El Tigre raised one hand and gravely, even solemnly, said:

"Giles Percival, take your last view of this world!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE WIT OF A FOOL.

COLONEL MARIOT was running in a country with which he was but little acquainted. He had once before passed over the same ground when on a hunt, but he retained only an indistinct recollection of it, and was now obliged to use his wits vigorously.

There was great danger of running into a trap formed by Nature, and such a blunder might prove fatal.

When crossing the table where we last saw him he looked eagerly ahead for some sign of the Rio Grande. He felt sure that he must be near the river, and he had resolved to attempt the passage, as much as he feared the Scorpion Brothers.

In fact, it seemed to be his only hope, for he realized that he was being hemmed in more completely every minute.

He looked at Nida, and then scowled at the expression on her face.

"You expect to be rescued now, I see."

"I do not expect this horse to run much further," returned the girl, quietly.

Mariot looked at the animal, and then swore roundly.

"You are right; he is nearly gone," he admitted. "I've seen horses helped along by the point of a knife, but he isn't one of that kind. He's pluck to the backbone, and when he stops it will be in a heap."

"What do you expect to gain by this mad flight, Colonel Mariot?" Nida earnestly asked.

"Life!" he tersely answered.

"If that is all, why don't you leave me?"

"It is not all; I want you, too, and by heaven, I'm going to have you."

He looked at her in a way which made her shudder, and then smiled in his old, peculiar way as he saw her emotion.

By that time the further side of the table was reached, and the ground began to descend. A clean view was given the fugitive, and as he looked, he suddenly uttered another curse.

He had seen two men, Rangers, moving in a course which would surely cut him off if he kept his course.

He turned both horses more to the left and tried to increase their speed.

"I would save them if I could, for they deserve good treatment if ever anything mortal did. They have run nobly without a spur, and the touch of a knee is equal to a rein, but— Hal!"

He broke off suddenly in his speech. Nida's horse had begun to reel and stagger perceptibly, and Mariot at once leaned over and lifted her to the back of his own animal.

"That brute is gone and this one will soon follow under a double load," he harshly said. "Wait until I see a rocky place and I'll make a stand and fight it out. Curse them! they shall see what French blood is good for!"

What he was looking for was soon found, in the shape of a rocky ravine with ledges arising steeply on each side, the whole covered with bushes and vines and shaded by trees which grew on the high land above.

A fine place to hide, if the search was not too close; and a good place to fight for a man who aimed only to sell his life as dearly as possible.

Mariot leaped to the ground, sent his horse off toward the river by a stroke of his hand and then turned to Nida.

"Here we go for the last act in the drama. I have cut loose from all other ways of escape and put my trust in that ravine. Do you go with me?"

She dared not refuse, with such a look on his face, so she silently started for the ravine.

"You are gloriously sensible," he said, with his half-smile. "I shall hate to die and leave such a woman behind me."

She made no answer and he led the way along the southern side of the ravine. The way was rough and difficult, but he moved rapidly, fearing every moment that the Rangers would appear and discover him.

Such being the case, he made haste to choose a refuge, and he found it at the foot of a rock thirty feet high. For the greater part of the way it arose sheer and quite smooth, but near the base the vines before mentioned had climbed up its face, hanging to seams, and formed a curtain ten feet high.

The rock itself was for a hundred or more feet too steep to be climbed, and was a part of a ledge more than three times that length.

Mariot came to a halt behind the vines.

"Here we stand!" he quietly said. "I hope there won't be any trouble, but if they find and press me, I die at the base of this cliff. Maybe you'll ask them to bury me decently, but there will be no need of marking the spot. Those who knew me when I was a child would never recognize me under the name of Mariot."

He nonchalantly placed a fresh cartridge in his rifle and looked down the ravine.

No one was in sight.

Nida began to be oppressed by a fear that they would really remain undiscovered. The place was so wild that it seemed as though the pursuers would not expect a man fleeing by horse to enter there.

She did not know the Rangers, however.

Anon, Mariot growled a curse, and, looking down the ravine, Nida saw a half-dozen men with Buck Butler at their head slowly making their way up the place.

"Curse them!" uttered Mariot, "do you see what they are doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"They are following our trail. That Butler is a very bloodhound. I always hated him, and now I wish I had killed him weeks ago. But, by Jupiter, it ain't too late now. I can drop him in his tracks."

He raised his rifle and drew the hammer back, but Nida caught his arm.

"Stop!" she said, firmly. "You shall not shoot!"

He turned upon her with his hand raised as though for a blow, but just then the sharp crack of a rifle rung out through the ravine and Mariot started back.

Then he put his hand to his neck and held it up stained with blood.

"A mere scratch," he said, "but I'll show them that two can play at that game. Stand back!"

He parted the vines. The Rangers had paused, and one man, who stood just behind Buck, was reloading his rifle.

"Are you there, Butler?" shouted the colonel.

"You see I am waiting for you."

"I'll be thar deerectly, durn you!" retorted Buck.

"Ef I knew ther gal would be safe, I'd put a bullet through yer head now."

"Don't try it. That girl, Buck, is my shield. If you advance, I'll shoot the first man who moves; and if any of you get to close quarters, my knife shall be in her heart before I can be hit. By the same rule, shooting won't work for you may hit her."

Buck scarcely heard this explanation, for his gaze had rested upon a new and interesting sight. At the top of the rock above Mariot's head, Mad Tom suddenly appeared with his crooked staff, while in his other hand he held some object not so easily distinguished.

Without pausing, the Rover knelt near the edge of the rock, a little beyond where Mariot stood, and then his movements were for a while invisible.

He was, however, working systematically.

At the foot of the rock, and just back of her captor, Mad Tom could see Nida, and as he began to uncoil a lasso it looked as though he had a practical plan for her rescue.

Making the customary noose at the end of the lasso, the Rover dropped it over the edge of the rock. It descended rapidly and steadily until it touched Nida upon the shoulder.

She started, but made no cry. Looking up, she saw the lasso and, above it, a human face—whose, she could not tell. The lasso, however, spoke plainly and eloquent, and with a quick motion she cast it over her shoulders.

Mariot was still talking to Buck Butler and knew nothing of the scene transpiring behind him.

And the sight seen by Buck, which so interested him, was Mad Tom standing on the top of the rock and drawing Nida upward hand over hand with an ease and rapidity which proved his great strength.

It was a rough journey for the girl, but, at last, the top was reached, the Rover put out his hands and drew her to the level space and she was forever out of Mariot's power.

Buck Butler greeted the *finis* of this exploit with a ringing shout.

"Oh! Mariot, you durned blockhead!" he cried. "I thought you sharper than that. Whar is ther gal?"

The colonel turned quickly. He had believed there was no way for Nida to escape, except to pass him, and had not watched her closely. The idea of aid from the top of the rock had never occurred to him.

He looked, and then his dark face grew gray.

"The jig is up, and they will riddle me now, sure as fate. Oh! why did I turn my hand against Gilbert? No, not that, but why didn't I make sure when I struck?"

"Do you surrender now?" demanded Buck, impatiently.

For answer Mariot turned toward him like a tiger. He had nothing left now except to die. He knew the way of Texan justice, and knew he would be hung if taken alive. Rather than that he would die by lead or steel, with his face toward the foe.

He threw up his rifle to cover Buck, but, before he could pull the trigger, another weapon cracked further down the ravine, and the assassin dropped his rifle and staggered back.

He caught blindly at the frail vines, as though they would support him, and then went headlong through the curtain and crashing down to the foot of the rocks.

When they reached him his power for mischief was forever gone. Shot through the breast, he lay dead in the dark ravine, a fit sepulcher for one of his nature and crimes.

CHAPTER XL.

FACING DEATH.

GILES PERCIVAL faced the Scorpion Brothers with outward calmness, but he was far from being reconciled to the fate they had laid out for him. Life still had charms for him, and it was not pleasant, to say the least, to die like an ox in the shambles.

"Give me one moment," he said, as the Mexicans advanced with their naked knives.

"What is it?" El Tigre asked, impatiently, but at the same time pausing.

"You will remember that I have before told you that I am not the man you want. I repeat it now. I never saw you, or any of your band, outside of Texas. I have no more idea of the aims of your organization than an unborn babe. Who are you, men, and what means this thing which hangs from my neck?"

He had spoken earnestly, but something like contempt crept into his voice as he looked down at the sign of the mysterious league.

El Tigre made an angry gesture.

"Is this all you have to say?" he asked.

"There is one thing more, and I want to lay some stress upon it. As I understand the matter, the man against whom you have sworn revenge came to your quarters, wherever that may be, and passed himself off as Giles Percival. I told you once that that man was an impostor, and that he had no right to that name. I'll take back what I then said, for I

have every reason to believe that he was just what he represented himself to be. For my own part, however, I deny that I was that man; I deny that I was ever one of your band or ever played you false. This fact is easily explained—I am not Giles Percival!"

El Tigre had listened closely through this long address, but at its end his lip curled scornfully.

"Another trick!" he sneered. "You fight hard for your life—harder, in your way, than I would have believed you capable of doing. Once I thought you a brave man."

"Look me in the face, Mexican, and see if one muscle moves or that danger has taken away my color," the prisoner retorted.

The chief shook his head.

"Your nerves are good," he acknowledged.

"I can die without flinching," continued the other, "but I do not want to suffer for another man's crime. I tell you I am not Giles Percival—my name is Hugh Parkman!"

"That part is of no consequence," said El Tigre, curtly. "You are the man who betrayed the Scorpions, and as such you shall die! Now, brothers, together!"

The speaker raised his knife, and in a minute more seven weapons would have been buried in the prisoner's body, but just then a new voice broke in on the silence, sharply and imperatively.

"Hold, there, every man! Throw up your hands and look me in the eyes!"

The first and last of the three orders were instinctively obeyed. The Scorpions turned their heads as one man and looked at the new actors in the drama.

They looked to see four rifles leveled and covering their own breasts, the muzzles steady and ominous, and the distance so short that even a child could not miss.

The man at the tree looked too, and then he started at recognizing two of the four persons as Buck Butler's "cubs," Joan and Jean, while the other two were men in the dress of Rangers.

He who had spoken was a finely-built young fellow, but a slouch hat partially covered his face, and no one recognized him.

"Stand right where you are," he continued. "You perceive that your lives are in our hands. Two of the rifles covering you are repeaters, and each member of my squad shoots to kill when he or she touches the trigger. Put your hands above your heads and keep them there!"

El Tigre saw that he was fairly caught. The rifles of his party were leaning against a tree twenty feet away. Before they could reach them they would be riddled with bullets. The chief was cunning, and, knowing the value of delay, promptly obeyed.

Up went the hands of the entire Scorpion party, and then the leader of the new-comers strode forward and took position by the side of the prisoner.

Plucking his hat from his head he tossed it to the ground, and looking at El Tigre, calmly asked one question:

"Which of us is Giles Percival?"

Ay, which was Giles? Before the hat was removed El Tigre would have answered the question promptly, but now he was at fault.

Before him he saw two men very much alike. In height and weight there could have been very little difference; their dress was similar, and both had dark hair, strong, round faces, and keen eyes.

The resemblance was not wonderful, but it was sufficiently close to interest and perplex the Scorpion chief.

"Well, what do you say?" asked the new-comer, impatiently, as El Tigre continued silent.

"He is Giles Percival," said the Mexican, sullenly, as he pointed to the bound man.

The latter had been deeply moved since the coming of his champion. He had at first looked startled, like one who sees a ghost; then, doubtful, but at last happier than for many a day.

He looked earnestly at the man beside him, almost pleadingly, but the latter's gaze was fixed keenly on El Tigre.

"Wrong, my dear Costello, wrong," he said, in answer to the chief's last words. "That man is precisely what he has said; his name is Hugh Parkman. I have the honor and peril of being Giles Percival, the ex-Scorpion. It was I who saved Inez Costello from death, who was afterward petted by her and by you, Leon Costello, and by you inveigled into joining your League. It was I who betrayed you, and I am only sorry the government of Mexico did not then succeed in sending you to the fate you deserved. Do you believe I am Giles Percival?"

Ay, El Tigre believed at last, but he looked at Hugh Parkman in bewilderment.

"This man—this man—" he stammered.

"Knows nothing of you or of the Silver Scorpions, and yet he is the man you chased through Mexico, Arizona, and again across the Rio Grande, and the one you have pursued for weeks. You were on the wrong track—I am Giles Percival."

"But he claimed the name."

"So he did, and trouble enough his claim brought him. Well, Costello, as I said before, I am Giles Percival, and I know this world is not wide enough for both of us to live in peace. One of us must die. You want my life, and I am willing you should try for it. I will fight you, knife to knife, and there let the vendetta end. Are you willing?"

Before the chief could answer there was a rattling rifle volley at one side, followed by a Texan cheer, and five of El Tigre's companions fell dead in front of him.

Another moment and the Rangers, led by Buck Butler, charged toward the spot.

The genuine Giles Percival moved like a flash. Two strokes of his knife released his counterfeit, or Hugh Parkman, as we will hereafter call him, from his helpless position, and then he put El Tigre behind him and drew two revolvers.

The sixth Scorpion made a dash for his rifle, but was stopped half-way by a bullet from the man near the Butler sisters.

Giles Percival faced the Rangers with his revolvers, at the same time watching El Tigre.

"Hold! all of you!" he commanded. "Rest here on your laurels. All the Greasers are down but one, and he is my own prize."

Hugh Parkman moved to his side with a revolver he had borrowed from Joan.

"I am with him here," he simply said.

The Rangers paused and all looked in surprise at

the two Giles Percivals. Joan and Jean had moved behind their father, watching the chief actors closely, but pausing long enough to welcome Nida as she came up.

Seeing that he had checked the Rangers, Giles turned once more to El Tigre.

"Leon Costello," he said, quietly, "you come of a race that is remarkably skillful in the use of the knife, and though most of you prefer to stab your enemies in the back, I may call it your national weapon. You claim to be a hard fighter—will you fight me with knives to the death?"

"Yes," said the chief, quickly.

Giles turned to his double.

"Will you see fair play on the part of the Texans, Hugh?" he asked.

"Yes, but—"

"But nothing. I shall fight."

He turned to El Tigre, who still held his knife, and then, passing his revolvers backward to Hugh, faced the Mexican with only his bowie.

"Let us lose no time," he quietly said.

"I am ready," was the deep reply.

And then the two advanced until they stood foot to foot, their knives raised, each watching the other with catlike keenness.

Giles made the first blow, El Tigre parried neatly and then the fight was fairly begun. Neither man wasted time in fine play; every stroke was made with a deadly purpose, and only the skill of the contestants saved them from fatal wounds at the first.

Back and forth they went, their eyes blazing, every nerve strained to the utmost and their breath coming sharply through their teeth.

Suddenly—just how none of the spectators ever knew—the knife of the Texan went through El Tigre's guard, disappeared in his muscular breast and only became visible again when the Scorpion chief reeled back and fell prostrate to the ground.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE STORY OF THE SILVER SCORPIONS.

EL TIGRE never arose after that fall. A few struggles passed through his muscular frame and then he lay quiet and forever stilled. The knife had been driven home with a practiced hand.

Giles Percival cast away the weapon, folded his arms and looked gravely down at the dead man.

"Exit, Leon Costello!" he muttered, like one whose thoughts were far away.

"Who is he?" the spectators asked of each other, for they could distinguish Percival and Parkman, from each other and believed they had never before seen the victor of the knife-duel.

Only Jean and Joan, besides Parkman, could have answered the question and they remained silent.

Perhaps five minutes passed, and then Giles turned to Hugh.

"Wait for me here; I will return in a moment," he said; and then walked away until the trees concealed him from view.

All crowded around his double with questions, but they were directed to wait, and very soon they were startled by a sound like a hunter's horn.

They looked and saw Mad Tom approaching, leaning on his crooked staff. Once he paused, placed his hands to his mouth and repeated the note, and then he came swiftly forward, pausing at last before Buck Butler.

"Give charity to Poor Tom!" he said, in his old, hoarse tones. "Have pity on Tom, whom the foul fiend has chased over prairie and mountain, over foaming river and burning desert, who has worn centipedes for lockets and rattlesnakes for finger-rings. Do him some charity—'Poor Tom's a-cold! Poor Tom's a-cold!'"

The Rover broke off suddenly, hung heavily on his staff, and muttered dismally.

"Durned if I don't," said Buck, genially. "You may be a fool, but your wit saved little Nida, and I won't forget it."

The Rover laughed lightly, and then stood erect. He cast aside his staff, fumbled for a moment about his person, and then his coat of rags fell aside, prairie grass and all; he brushed back the tangled hair from his face and stood before them—the genuine Giles Percival!

The transformation surprised all except the Butler sisters. They had learnt his secret an hour before, and now enjoyed the surprise of the others.

Let the last scene of our story be at the village of Danby, where the Percival family was for the time staying, awaiting the building of their new house.

Colonel Mariot and Leon Costello, otherwise known as "El Tigre," had been buried where they had fallen, and as the last act in the drama, several of our characters were gathered to hear in detail the story of the strange league which had caused so much trouble to the majority of them.

Those present were the real Giles Percival and he whom we have so long erroneously called by that name—Hugh Parkman—Morton Percival, Roland Gilbert, Buck Butler, Nida, Joan and Jean.

"The whole tragic affair has come of my wild and roving disposition," said Giles. "That roving inclination took me from home when I was a mere boy. I ran away to sea, afterward secured my father's pardon by letter, and in the years which followed saw life in India, Australia and Africa—anywhere that I could see a chance for wild sport."

"At last, after many years, I turned my face homeward, going by way of Mexico. While in that country I one day saved the life of a young woman, named Inez Costello, and in that way became acquainted with her and her brother Leon."

"Both took a strong fancy to me, and as I stayed with them until people began to connect my name matrimonially with that of Inez, Leon invited me to join a secret society called the Silver Scorpions. It was a vast and far-reaching league, comprising every social and professional grade and class of the country—rich and poor, patrician, peon and beggar, statesmen, priests, merchants and tillers of the soil."

"Its object was to overturn the existing government, to completely revolutionize the religion, social condition, customs and laws of the country—in fact, to make an entire change in everything pertaining

to that land of revolutions. It interested all, from the ambitious statesman to the peon; and when I tell you that, in addition to all this, religion was freely mixed in, you will see that the heart and soul of the plotters were in the work."

"Into this league I was drawn by Costello, partly because he had gained a certain influence over me, as had his sister, but more because I was wild and reckless; and I continued faithful to them until, just as the conspirators were about to strike, I learned that their ascension was to be gained by wanton assassinations and crimes which filled me with deepest horror."

"Had I been wise I should have left Mexico and the Silver Scorpions; but, instead, I went to the existing authorities and told of the plot, and all the leaders were seized, tried and executed."

"Ah! I little knew what a storm I had raised about my head. All the rage of the conspirators turned against me. Statesmen, merchants, priests and laborers alike clamored for my blood; and, to make matters worse, one of their churches was entered and despoiled, while on the same night Inez Costello was murdered in her room."

"Who did these deeds I do not know, but Costello believed it was I. He had succeeded to the leadership of what remained of his league, and he sent his bravos after me."

"Just at that time I had received a letter from one Hugh Parkman, my cousin. He had lived in the East but was making a tour of Mexico, and he had invited me to meet him at one of the towns near the Rio Grande."

"I went, but I had not been in his company an hour when I was shot down at his side—dead, as he believed. The Scorpion Brothers had attacked the house. He cut his way through them and escaped; and after that they fired the house, which was burnt to the ground."

"Hugh thought me dead, and then upon him flashed a romantic plan. You, my father, had a sister in early life who was cast off by your parents for marrying a man they disliked. She went to New England, her father heard from her no more, and when he died all his property went to you."

"Hugh Parkman was your sister's child, and he had always felt bitterly toward you, for he believed he should have a share in the family property instead of leading so hard a life as he had done; and when he believed me dead, he conceived the idea of passing himself off for me, to see and judge you, and, perhaps, to regain his share of the property."

"Everything pointed to success; there was a resemblance between him and myself, and it was years since you had seen me. He spent a little time in Arizona, to familiarize himself with his new identity, and then came here to be received by you as your son. You thought it natural that so many years should change a boy into a stalwart man and suspected nothing."

"Meanwhile, I had barely escaped from the burning house where I was shot down, after which I lay for three weeks in a cave in the hills, nursed by an old man who was a hermit and cared nothing for the plots and passions of the world."

"As I grew better I realized that I must have some disguise or the Silver Scorpions would soon strike me again. I reflected for awhile, and as a result became Mad Tom. The idea was gathered from Shakespeare's character in King Lear, and, at all times, I tried to imitate 'Edgar.'"

"I crossed the Rio Grande and came here to find my cousin, Hugh, using my identity; but I was well satisfied and kept my character of Mad Tom. I had an ample supply of small weapons about my rags, and often carried a rifle concealed in the prairie grass about my person, and no one suspected that I was acting a part."

"Hugh, however, found himself in an uncomfortable position. The Scorpions, believing him to be Giles Percival, had followed hotly, and they began to strike when they could."

"Their first blow was in Arizona, but their man blundered, attacked Gilbert instead of Hugh, and was killed in a fair contest. The second attack came when Hugh, Gilbert and Mariot went on a jaguar-hunt, and as one of the Scorpions had Hugh covered with his rifle, he would have shot him had I not chanced to be near, and got in my shot ahead of his."

"Mariot, by the way, had once been a Scorpion himself, and he knew the would-be assassin was of the band, and was about to shoot Hugh; and he secretly removed the man's talisman from his neck. At the same time I marked the figure of a scorpion on a tree to puzzle Mariot, but covered up my trail so well that even Buck Butler could not follow it."

"Shortly after, Costello, or El Tigre, seized Hugh and tried to burn him in the chaparral, but I was on hand and rescued him from their grasp. He did not see me, and never suspected his helper was the Rover of the Rio Grande. I also played ventriloquist on this occasion."

"About this time I learned that Mariot, with Violette for a tool, was laying plans to make trouble in this household, and win Nida for his wife, and I thwarted him on several occasions. Once I stole a note by which he thought to blacken Gilbert's reputation, and one night I entered Violette's room to warn her. I was then without any disguise, and in the scene which followed I nearly lost my life in trying to keep her from seeing my face."

"I was saved by a timely shot fired by Jean Butler, whom I afterward saw and asked to promise to say nothing. She obeyed, but her father's questioning caused her a good deal of trouble."

"I was often in the house when no one suspected it; and once I saved Nida from abduction by killing one of the Scorpions at her door. The sudden coming of Hugh compelled me to leave the body where it was."

"Paula was an active assistant of the Scorpions, being a faithful and unscrupulous member of the League. She once tried to drug the whole household; it was she who placed the dagger and paper in Hugh's room, and she who admitted the assassins on the night the house was burned. I do not, however, blame her greatly, for she acted according to her wisdom."

"On the night when Mariot attempted to murder Gilbert in the chaparral, I prevented pursuit on the part of the Scorpions by sending them on a false trail; and I saved Nida from Mariot and changed

my base quickly enough to appear to El Tigre when he was about to kill Hugh.

"Once I tried to end Costello's existence by shooting at him in the woods, but missed through darkness; on another occasion his men made me a prisoner and I acted as their guide; and again, one night when I had killed a Scorpion who was prowling around my father's house, I actually accosted a second prowler, got him to aid me to carry away the body and then revealed my identity; fought him and threw his body in the river.

"In conclusion, let me say I have no blame for my cousin Hugh. He blames himself, and thinks people will look at his deceit as mercenary, unfeeling and selfish, but I have seen, little by little, that he has a large heart and a brave nature; and, to-day, I would share my last crust with him, if necessary.

"And why should I not? Did he not take from my head the greatest danger of my life, and set me free from the curse of the Silver Scorpions?"

Hugh Parkman was happy, but it seemed to him that those who knew him ought to blame instead of thank him.

Really, however, his deceit had cost him a good deal of remorse, and his fight against the Silver Scorpions had been so brave that all men admired him.

With that day's work on the Rio Grande, the career of the League ended on Texan soil. They afterward arose against the Mexican government and won, only to themselves fall in another revolution soon after.

Paula was seen no more in Texas, but report says she still lives and is the wife of Ralph.

Violette, thinking herself a deeply-wronged woman, made haste to return to New Orleans.

Roland Gilbert entirely recovered from his wound, and married Nida Percival. We need only add that they are happy.

And Giles Percival and Hugh Parkman—well, the best proof we can offer that they really bore each other no ill will is that, in due time, they married Jean and Joan Butler, respectively, and, running a ranch together, are always on good terms.

Their wives have abandoned the rifle for household duties, and all are well satisfied with their lots in life.

Buck Butler continued his wild life, and was often heard to tell the story of Mad Tom and the Scorpion Brothers.

THE END.

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